THE FROBISHERS

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3/6

THE FROBISHERS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Mohalah
In the Roar of the Sea
The Queen of Love
Cheap Jack Zita
Mrs. Curgenven of Curgenven
Arminell
Jacquetta
Urith
Kitty Alone
Margery of Quether
Noémi
The Broom-Squire
Dartmoor Idylls
Guavas the Tinner
The Pennycomequicks
Bladys
Domitia
Pabo, the Priest
Winefred

THE FROBISHERS

A STORY OF THE
STAFFORDSHIRE POTTERIES

BY

S. BARING-GOULD

> QUID CONTRAXISTIS FRONTEM? QUIA TRAGÆDIAM DIXI FUTURAM HANC? DEUS SUM: COMMUTAVERO EANDEM HANC, SI VOLTIS; FACIAM EX TRAGÆDIA COMÆDIA UT SIT.
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N.G.

THE FROBISHERS

CHAPTER I

A BUTTERFLY OUT OF PLACE

"I THOUGHT as much!" said Joan.

She was standing in a road—a byway—through an oak coppice, in her riding habit beside her horse, and had ungirthed him and removed the saddle.

"Poor old boy, I am sorry for you. You must have suffered, and yet you went bravely along, and splendidly over the fence."

Ruby turned his head at his mistress's voice, snuffed his approval of her sympathy, and stood unmoving, save that the skin twitched about an ugly raw on the shoulder.

"It is that tree again," said Joan. "Some saddlers seem never to grasp the law by which a tree is made to fit. I have sent this saddle twice to Oxley, and he has vowed, by all things blue, on each occasion, that he has rectified the defect. Never, old boy, shall you have this side-saddle on your back again."

Once more the patient horse turned his head, looked at his mistress and snuffed, as though accepting the assurance in full confidence. He knew Joan, knew that she pitied him, knew that he would be cared for.

"I beg your pardon—are you in difficulties? and can I be of any assistance?" asked a young man, breaking through the coppice of sere russet leaves, and descending on his hunter to the road that was cut some two feet below the surface of the shrub and tree clothed hillside. He was not in pink, but in a dark serviceable coat, and wore white corduroy breeches, a stiff velvet hunting cap, and top-boots, and was spurred.

"I am at a loss what to do," answered the girl. "I have acted most inconsiderately. I let my sister Sibyll ride on, and take the groom with her. I lagged because I had a suspicion that something was going wrong with Ruby. Of course I ought to have detained the groom, but my sister was eager, and I did not like to spoil her sport. Next piece of want of consideration that I was guilty of was to dismount here in the wood, to lift the saddle and see if the dear old fellow were rubbed. Look! how badly he has been served. I cannot possibly replace the saddle and remount him. So I shall have to walk all the way to Pendabury House in a riding skirt—and only a lady knows how laborious that is."

"To Pendabury!"

"Yes, that is our home."

Joan now looked for the first time with any interest at the gentleman with whom she had been conversing, and at once perceived that he was not one of the usual party that attended a meet and followed the hunt, but was an entire stranger.

"I am Miss Frobisher," she said.

"I must introduce myself," he at once spoke; "my name is Beaudessart."

"Beaudessart!"

It was now her turn to express surprise.

"Then," said she, "I have a sort of notion that some kind of relationship exists between us!"

"For my sins, none," answered the young man; "in place of relation there has been estrangement. My grandfather married a Mrs. Frobisher, a widow, and your father was her son by a former husband. The families have been in contact, brought so by this marriage, but it has produced friction. However, let us not consider that; let the fact of there having been some connection embolden me to ask your permission to transfer your side-saddle to my mare, and to lead your galled Ruby to his stable."

"You are very good."

"There is not a man in the hunt who would not make the same offer."

"I cheerfully admit that our South Staffordshire hunters are ever courteous and ready to assist a damsel in difficulties. Is not that the quality of chivalry?"

"The same applies to every gentleman in England," said Mr. Beaudessart. "Wherever he sees need, perplexity, distress, thither he flies with eager heart to assist."

He had already dismounted, and without another word proceeded to remove his own saddle, and to adjust that of the lady to the back of his mare.

"One moment," said Joan Frobisher. "I ought to forewarn you that you are running a risk—the tree of my saddle will fit the back of no living horse."

"It will do no harm so long as my Sally is not galloped, Miss Frobisher. I shall have to lay on you the injunction not to fly away. Besides, I am a stranger in this part of the country. It was that which threw me out, and brought me through the coppice. I do not know my way to Pendabury, and shall need your guidance."

He placed his hands in position to receive Joan's foot, and with a spring she was in the saddle. Then he looked up at her.

She was a tall, well-built girl. In her dark green hunting habit, the collar turned up with scarlet, and brightened with the South Staffordshire hunt buttons, her graceful form was shown to good effect.

She had well-moulded features, the jaw had a bold sweep, and the chin was firmly marked. The eyes were large, lustrous, and soft. If the modelling of the lower portion of her face conveyed a suspicion of hardness, this was at once dispelled by the soft light of the kindly eyes.

Mr. Beaudessart now fitted his own saddle on the back of Ruby so as not to incommode the galled beast.

"I was in a difficulty," said Joan, as they began to move forward down the roadway. "I might have been run in by the agents of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and had to appear at the next Petty Sessions — before papa—think of that, and be fined sixpence, and costs, eight-and-nine; total, nine-and-threepence. It would have made a hole in my pocket-money."

"Do the costs stand in that proportion to the fine? I really know nothing of English magistrates and their courts."

"Oh, the magistrates have nothing to do with costs. These are inexplicable to the uninitiated. The Greek mysteries are nothing to them."

Then they proceeded a little way without talking, as the road became steep.

On reaching ground less precipitous, Joan asked—

"You say that you are a stranger in these parts?"

"Yes—entirely."

"No, not entirely. Your name is familiar to all. Why, our church is full of Beaudessart monuments, and the county history is prodigal in the matter of pedigree of Beaudessart. For the matter of that, we have any number of pictures of them at Pendabury."

"Are you great in pedigree?" asked the young man with a smile.

"Of a horse. I know nothing of my own, and care little. By the way, it is through a Beaudessart that we came by our home; and"—laughing—"we do not intend to surrender it without a siege. We have a portrait in the dining-room of the last of the Beaudessart squires of Pendabury, a choleric, resolute man, to judge by his counterfeit presentment."

The young man looked up at Joan with a flicker in his eyes and a twinkle of a smile on his lips.

Joan perceived it, and was rendered nervous, lest she might have said something in bad taste, something that had touched him and made him wince, and he had disguised the pain with a smile. Did he really think that she suspected him of making a claim to the Pendabury estate? She scrutinised his face to read his mind, but the smile ambiguously twitching the corners of the mouth had passed away, and he strode forwards serene in countenance, with an elastic tread and a toss of the head, as though he had put from him whatever thought had passed through his mind at the provocation of her words. The young man was upright in carriage, broad in back, his head covered with light hair that rippled over his forehead and curled forth behind from under his velvet cap. Surely when a child he must have had natural ringlets of gold. His face was fresh, open, honest, and careless in expression. His eyes were dark grey. He looked like a man of good feeling, and one who was well bred.

"Mr. Beaudessart," said Joan, "you must have formed a very bad opinion of my intelligence, coming on me as you did, in the depth of a wood and far from assistance. I had put myself into a position of great awkwardness; I got off Ruby to examine his shoulder without a thought that, granted he were sound, I could not girth him up tight enough to remount, and that if I found him badly rubbed I should have to walk home. What can you think of me?"

"I think only of the tenderness of your heart, that put all considerations for self on one side, in solicitude for your horse."

"Thank you. I am very fond of Ruby. Nevertheless, I blame myself for lack of foresight." Then, changing her tone as she changed the subject, she asked, "Have you been long in our neighbourhood?"

"We took the cottage at Rosewood—do you chance to know it?"

Joan made a movement of assent.

"We took it at Lady Day last on a term of years. But we, that is my mother and I, spent all the summer in Switzerland, after we had settled our few sticks of furniture in the house. The garden had been neglected and not stocked, so that it was too late in the year when we came into possession to do very much with it. My mother has great ambition to cultivate a garden. We are not notable gardeners in Canada—she is a Canadian, and I was born there. It will be a new experience here, and one to give her great pleasure. She has read about English ladies and the little paradises they create, in which they pass their innocent hours, and she hopes to acquire the same tastes, and reap the same joys, and to spend her declining years in flowery bliss. She is a dear mother to me," he added, in a tone full of tenderness, and Joan liked him for the words.

Thus conversing, they reached the outskirts of the wood, and were on the highway between hedges in pleasant champaign country.

"I have some excuse for being ignorant of the lie of the land," said Mr. Beaudessart. "I was born, as I told you, in Canada. My father lived and died there."

"And your mother will be happy in England?"

"Oh, she knows that I have to be here; it was my father's urgent request. He hungered after the old fatherland."

"Have you sisters?"

"I have a sister, who is now with my mother, but she is with her only now and then. She has taken her own line, and has become a nurse. I suppose Rosewood is some miles from here—how many I have not the faintest notion."

"If you hunt with us, you will don the pink?"

"I do not know about that. It costs about twenty pounds to blaze out a full-blown poppy, and the suit will last but a season. It is rather like advertising oneself as a man of large fortune, and I am not that. I can live, but cannot be lavish."

So they talked, falling into half confidences; and presently many evidences appeared of approach to a gentleman's seat of some importance. The trees stood in clumps. Hedges no longer divided the fields; they were parted by wire fences. Ploughed land gave way to pasturage. Then were heard the sounds of rooks cawing, and a church spire pierced the rounded banks of trees, that had not all lost their foliage, though that foliage was turned to copper.

And presently they came to the gates.

At that moment up trotted Joan's sister Sibyll, with the groom following her. The younger Miss Frobisher was but eighteen; she was a very pretty and graceful girl, with a high colour and dancing eyes. She was now in great spirits, and, riding up to her sister, exclaimed—

"Oh, Joan! give me joy! I am the happiest girl on earth. On this, the first meet of the season, I was in at the death. Look! I have had my cheeks painted; and see! I have the brush, and am promised the mask when it is mounted."

Then she noticed the gentleman leading Ruby, and raised her eyebrows.

"What ails your horse?" she inquired.

"Sibylla—this is Mr. Beaudessart. Sir—my sister.

Mr. Beaudessart has been so very kind. My poor Ruby is frightfully rawed; I could not ride him home, so this gentleman has most generously lent me his mount and has led my horse." Then to the young man: "Mr. Beaudessart, you must come into Pendabury and have a cup of tea or a glass of wine. You have eight or nine miles to cover before reaching home, and I have spoiled your day's hunting. Moreover, you positively must see the original Beaudessart *Stammburg*, as the Germans would term it."

He bowed, and said in reply—

"Are you sure that your father would desire it?"

"Quite so. How could he do other?"

Still he hesitated. Joan saw that he was desirous of accepting her invitation, but was unwilling to intrude.

"No!" she said, "I will not take a refusal. A lady's invitation carries all the force of a command. If it be not accepted, she is mortally affronted."

"In that case I have no alternative."

They passed through the great gates into the grounds that unfolded before them as they proceeded, sweeping lawns, park-like, with the house, a Queen Anne mansion, square and stately, standing back against a well-wooded hill, the sun flashing golden in the long windows that looked to the west.

"It is a beautiful spot," said the young man in a grave tone, and a change came over his face.

"Oh, Joan!" exclaimed Sibyll, riding beside her sister, "such fun! I had never been in at the death before. And fancy! when puss was *in extremis*, fallen on and torn to pieces by the hounds—will you believe me? there was a butterfly flickering above the scene of blood and death-agony unconcernedly. Conceive! a butterfly at this period of the year; so out of season!"

"So out of place," said Joan.

CHAPTER II

PENDABURY

STEPS led to the front door, that was under a portico composed of Ionic pillars of Bath stone, that contrasted, as did the white coigns, with the red sandstone of which the house was built, one of the warmest and best of building materials. The long windows had casements painted creamy white, and the roof of the house was concealed by a balustrade of white stone.

At the steps the ladies dismounted, and the groom and a boy who had run from the stables took the horses.

Then the two girls, gathering up their habits, mounted to the door, and Joan, as she ascended, turned with a slight bow and a smile of encouragement to the young man, feeling at the same time not a little puzzled at the hesitation, even reluctance, that he manifested in accompanying her within.

The butler opened the glass doors, and all then entered the lofty hall, out of which the staircase ascended to the upper apartments. It was a fine hall, rich with plaster work, and hung with full-length portraits.

"Matthews," said Miss Frobisher, "will you kindly inform your master that a gentleman is here — Mr. Beaudessart? Yet stay, we will drink tea in the dining-room. Please to put cold meat and wine on the sideboard."

"Yes, miss."

The man withdrew with a bow.

"Joan," said Sibyll, "I am going to rid myself of my boots and shed my habit."

"Have your tea first," urged the elder. "There is no occasion for such a hurry."

"Yes there is," answered the young girl. "It is all very well for you to sit down at once to a meal—you have been muddling along at a snail's pace on Ruby with a sore shoulder, but I have been in the swim all day, and was at the finish. I say, Joan, am I really much painted? It is rather horrible, is it not?—but such fun to have Reynard's blood on one's cheek. Only I suspect the painting was done in the slightest possible manner. I must send for the keeper to dress the brush for me. What is put on—borax? He will know. I will ring for Matthews to send after him."

"You really must postpone changing for ten minutes. Papa will be so interested to hear of your adventures and success."

"Oh, I shall run to him in the library on my way, and show him the badges of war and trophies of victory. I must go—I shall be down again in a trice. I have torn my skirt in a thorn bush, and am plastered with mud. Tally-ho! ta-ra-ra!"

Then she departed, twittering, "We will all go a-hunting to-day."

Joan turned to the young man with a pleasant smile, and said—

"My sister is somewhat wilful. You must excuse her—she is the spoilt child of the house. My father dotes on her, and every man, woman, and child in the place is her humble servant. Now look about you. Here all the faces and figures that adorn the walls are Beaudessarts, from that grim-visaged gentleman in trunk hose and spindle legs, which is the earliest portrait we have. Is there, by the way, anything you would like? A whisky and soda? Perhaps a wash above all things? I will call the footman. I shall be making tea, and you can come to me in the dining-room. Papa will be there. The servant, Joseph, will be your guide."

Joan expected her father to appear at once, but he did not arrive. Matthews had not found him in the study, he had gone forth into the grounds.

Sibylla, as well, was disappointed; she had bounded into the library to display her spoils.

Joan put tea in the silver pot over the lamp, and saw that the sideboard was well supplied with cold beef and pheasant, and that spirits and wine were set out; then she went to a glass and hastily arranged her hair.

Mr. Beaudessart was shown in by Joseph.

"Now," said the girl, "whilst the tea is brewing I am entirely at your service to show you the pictures. That over the mantelpiece is my father, and yonder is my mother, who was taken from us sixteen years ago. She was a beautiful woman when young, and you can see that in middle age the traces were not gone. Yonder is the portrait I told you of, Squire Hector Beaudessart, the last of the family in Pendabury. After his death the property fell to papa, though how it came about I cannot inform you. I believe it was a complicated affair."

The young man walked up to the picture and stood before it, gazing intently on the canvas. The evening sun shone into the room, not, happily, on the painting itself, but on a side wall, and the reflected light illumined the picture sufficiently for him to be able to see it distinctly.

"It is very well painted, I believe. Do you not consider it so?" asked Joan. "The artist was Knight, the academician."

"It is admirable. It portrays not only the outward features, as nose and eyes, but the inner character, resolution and remorselessness."

"I have heard that he was considered a determined old gentleman," said the girl.

"Pertinacious in pursuing his own course, impatient of contradiction, implacable in his resentments, and then—proud."

"If we have any good in us we are proud," said Joan. "Pride is a necessary factor in a man up to a certain point. It implies strength, or furnishes it. But vanity is mere weakness."

"Yes," answered the young man, "we must all have self-respect, but at the same time respect others. That I do not think my grandfather ever did if they dared to differ from him."

"Your grandfather!"

A cough behind them, as they stood contemplating the picture.

Joan knew it, whisked about, and saw her father entering the room with his stick in his hand.

"Oh, papa! I am so glad that you have arrived. Here is Mr. Beaudessart from Canada, so interested in the family portraits."

"Mr. Beaudessart," said Mr. Frobisher stiffly; "pray what Mr. Beaudessart?"

"I must apologise, sir, for my intrusion," said the young man, feeling at once a sense of chill from the presence of the squire. "I have ventured to ask Miss Frobisher to permit me to see the pictures."

"Papa!" said Joan, also aware of the coldness of her father's manner, "I insisted on Mr. Beaudessart coming in, he has been so kind. Ruby was frightfully rubbed, and he lent me his mare. Had he not done so

I should have had to walk home from Littlefold Wood."

"What Mr. Beaudessart may this gentleman be?" asked the squire, with a freezing manner. He was an old, spare man, with shrivelled legs, about which his trousers hung loosely, with a long, knife-like face, his hair very grey and curled about the temples. His nose was aquiline, his eyebrows thick and white, and his eyes bright and hard.

He wore a grey suit that, however, did not become him. He was one of those men with face and figure belonging to the first half of the nineteenth century, who look ill fitted in modern costume, one whom nothing would become save the high-collared coat, and the short waistcoat and abundant necktie of the reign of William IV. The studied absence of graciousness of manner assumed by Mr. Frobisher affected both the young people with a feeling of discomfort.

"My father was Walter," said the stranger; "he was son to that old gentleman yonder. My name is the same as that of my grandfather—Hector Beaudessart."

Joan was aware that something grated on and angered her father.

"My dear papa," she said, "you have no idea what a generous assistance Mr. Beaudessart has rendered me—at the sacrifice of his day's sport and pleasure. How I could have got home without his courteous and ready help I cannot tell. And having seen me to the Pendabury gates, he proposed returning home. But I would not hear of it; I insisted on his coming in and having some refreshment. Sibyll followed the hounds to the grim death, but I was brought to a full stop in the wood by the condition of Ruby."

"Sir," said Mr. Frobisher, looking straight at Mr. Beaudessart and ignoring his daughter, "I take it as a most surprising piece of assurance, your thrusting yourself into this house."

The young man coloured up, and replied with dignity—

"I grieve to my heart that you should so regard it; I am aware that there was some ill-feeling existing between yourself and my father, but I can assure you I do not share it, and I trusted that you, on your part, would have laid aside any sentiment that was bitter when the earth closed over his head. Allow me to relieve you of my presence."

"Sir," said Mr. Frobisher, bridling up and pointing at him with his stick, "I repeat, and emphasise my opinion, I consider it a gross, an unwarrantable piece of effrontery your intrusion here, taking advantage of my daughter's ignorance of the world, and of circumstances that must for ever estrange our families. Your deceased father's conduct"—

"Excuse me, sir. I may be to blame for my thoughtlessness, or for my belief that human nature was gentler than I find it, but I can hear nothing against my father. He behaved always as an honourable man. What charge can you or anyone lay against him?"

"That of having formed and obstinately maintained opinions contrary to those held by his father, the author of his being and the squire of the parish!" He flourished his stick and pointed to the picture of the old Squire Hector. "He might at least have kept his views to himself. I maintain that, by his conduct, he lost the blessing which is pronounced upon dutiful sons."

"A man is free to form his own opinions," said the young Hector, "and it would be unworthy of a man to keep them to himself. If he is worth his salt he will maintain them. My father did not disguise what he felt in his heart, and he suffered for his independence. I wish you a good-day."

He bowed and looked hastily at Miss Frobisher, whose cheek burned with shame. She could not meet his eye; her own were lowered and full of tears.

"Oh, papa! papa!" she gasped.

Mr. Beaudessart was gone.

"Papa, how could you treat him so after his great civility to me? It was I who asked him in. He was most reluctant to come here, but I insisted."

"Like a fatuous girl, you did wrong out of sheer dulness. It was a piece of outrageous impertinence in him, poking his nose into this house. I am, thank God, not dead yet, and till I am— But there, I have no patience to speak of the fellow. To come prying here! Desirous to see the pictures, indeed! He wanted to peer about at everything—take stock of all there is in the house."

"But why so, papa?"

"Why!—because, forsooth, some day Pendabury will be his."

"His—Mr. Beaudessart's!"

Joan was startled.

"Yes, his; but not one minute before I am laid in the churchyard."

"How can that be? The estate has left the Beaudessarts and come to us Frobishers."

"It has left them only during my life. Mr. Hector yonder"—he pointed with his stick to the portrait of the old squire—"his grandfather, very rightly was incensed with his son, Walter, for taking up with liberal views in politics, and for being bitten with advanced church opinions, such as were promulgated by the Oxford tract writers. Young fools at the time were up in the clouds with all sorts of inflated notions. Mr. Hector, the old squire, was furious with his son. As Walter would not abandon his opinions, the old man washed his hands of him, would not speak to him or admit him over his doorstep. He left the estate to me, his second wife's son by her former marriage, for my life, to revert to the Beaudessarts only after my decease and that of his son Walter, who, he protested, should be excluded entirely from the property."

"Really, papa, I think that Walter was very hardly treated. Young men are hot-headed and enthusiastic, but they cool down as they grow older."

"I do not see that he was hardly treated. I do not see it at all. It is I, or you, who meet with unfair treatment. If I had been so happy as to have had a son of my own, would I not have desired to transmit Pendabury to him? Is it not a monstrous injustice that I should be debarred from so doing? And you. I should have liked to constitute you heiress, so that, on your marriage, you would have carried this place to your husband. But it cannot be. This Beaudessart cub intervenes. When I depart this life you will have to pack your portmanteaus and turn out. It is atrocious, inhuman, unchristian."

"But, papa, it is *we* who are the interlopers. It is the Beaudessarts who have been unjustly treated."

"Interlopers! Oh, you think that jackanapes is defrauded of his rights by your own father? Is that an opinion a child of mine dares to entertain? There is filial respect, indeed! There is reverence for my grey hairs! Is contrariety a thing bred in these walls? Does a curse rest on Pendabury, that the child there should rise up and call its parent opprobrious names?"

"Oh, papa, I never did that! If any wrong were committed, it was not by you, but by the old Squire Hector. However, let all that be—I really know nothing of the particulars except what you have divulged. But do consider in what a painful, humiliating position I was placed by your speaking to the young Mr. Beaudessart as you did, and practically turning him out of the house."

"It was due to your own thoughtlessness."

"I knew nothing of what you have now told me; if I had I would have hesitated about asking him in."

"But he was aware, and should not have taken advantage of your ignorance. Enough of this—pour me out some tea. Ha, shrimps! Tea is the only meal at which I care for them, and then—if fresh—I love them."

CHAPTER III

AN ORANGE ENVELOPE

SIBYLLA came singing into the dining-room in bounding spirits.

"Oh, I am hungry! So glad there is cold beef. I must have some beer. I cannot stand your tea slops after a hard day. Papa, congratulate me! I have had the most splendid day in my life; a day to be marked with white chalk, a day never to be forgotten."

Then ensued an account of how she was in at the finish, with its concomitants.

"There were but five at the last," she added. "Joan dropped out very early over some scruple about Ruby. Bless me, Joan, why did you look? If you had not seen the raw, you might have gone on with a safe conscience. Do not pry, and seek to discover what is best not known. Take it for granted that all is well, till you have the contrary forced upon you. That is my doctrine and philosophy."

"Prying—exactly!" said Mr. Frobisher, looking up from his shrimps. "We have had an exemplification of prying here, that I have very properly exposed. Joan, did that cub happen to ask the sizes of the several rooms, so as to enable him to provide carpets? and the height of the windows for the furnishing of curtains?"

"Papa," answered Miss Frobisher, with pain in her face and in her tone, "I take the entire blame upon myself, as I have already assured you; he was most reluctant to intrude, but I insisted. I put it in such a way as to leave him no option but to come here. Sibyll is my witness. Even had I known that he was the man to whom Pendabury must eventually fall, I do not think that such knowledge would have weighed heavily with me. Usually the heir to an estate is not kept at a distance from it, and treated as an enemy by him who is in present enjoyment. If that were the usual condition of affairs, a father would be invariably at daggers drawn with his eldest son."

"Joan, the circumstances in this case are peculiar."

"I know no more of them than what I have just been told. I daresay that I have judged hastily from insufficient acquaintance with the particulars. Let this pass, papa. I had no intention of causing you annoyance, I can well assure you; and no one can regret more than I do that this *contretemps* has occurred."

"What is all this ruction about?" asked Sibylla, and then, without waiting for an answer, which, a she saw, neither was disposed to give, she went on, "Papa, Joan, who are coming to dinner to-night?"

"The rector and Mrs. Barker, and the young lady who is staying at Westholt,—I forget her name,—Colonel Wood, and Mr. Prendergast."

"Let me see," said the younger girl. "Papa takes in mother Frump; you are led by the rector; Colonel Wood gives his arm to Miss Somebody or other; and I am consigned to Jack Prendergast, the rector's pupil. Thank you. I shall have a headache and not appear."

"But, Sibyll, you must."

"A lively dinner for me, indeed, with that hobbledehoy, who can talk of nothing but his dog, and whose notions of sport rise no higher than ratting. Last time I sat by him he took my appetite away, because he would talk of his dog's distemper—and diagnose the disorder minutely. I am tired through hunting; I shall not come down."

"But, Sibyll, indeed you must remember what is due to our guests."

"Other people may be ill when they please, why not I?"

"But, remember, you are the heroine of this day."

"Ah, I forgot! Yes; I shall be down. I'll open Jack Prendergast's dull eyes. Why does he not come out?"

"He has not got a horse."

"But he should have one."

"I suppose he or his father cannot afford it."

"Then I do not see that we have any call to show him civility. A man who does not keep his hunter should know that his level is not ours."

"My dear Sibyll, it is not a note of gentility to have a well-stuffed purse. A man may be nice and yet poor."

"But he is not nice at all. He is not worth the trouble of talking to."

"If he had a horse, he would yarn about that; as he has only a dog, that interests him, and it is your duty to condescend to him, and maintain a doggy conversation."

"I will not trouble myself to discuss what does not interest me, and with a fellow so dull. He is reading with Mr. Barker for the university, and is safe to be plucked. He will disappear and subside into some business or other, and we shall happily see him no more."

The butler entered with a salver, and presented to the squire an orange envelope containing a telegraphic despatch.

Mr. Frobisher dipped his fingers in water, and leisurely wiped them on his napkin. Then he adjusted his pince-nez, and tore open the envelope.

Joan noticed that his face suddenly changed—a shadow fell over it, and it became grey as his hair.

He rose, staggering, to his feet.

"Matthews, order Fashion to be saddled and brought round. I must at once to Lichfield."

"Papa, not now!" exclaimed Sibyll. "You will hardly be back for dinner."

"Papa, not Fashion," urged Joan; "he is given to shying. Let Thomas drive you in."

"Bid them saddle Fashion at once," said Mr. Frobisher, putting out his hand, groping for his stick.

"Yes, sir. Is it to be immediately?" asked the butler.

"At once."

"What is the matter, papa?" asked Joan, as soon as the butler had withdrawn. At the same time she found the stick and placed it in her father's hand.

"Matter? You heard. I must go to Lichfield. If I am not back at the time our guests arrive, make my excuses. Say that urgent business has called me away."

"But you must be back," said his youngest daughter. "You must. Who else is to lead in Mrs. Barker?"

"We will settle that," said Joan to her sister; and then to her father, "I wish you would let Thomas drive you over in the dogcart."

"No, no," he answered impatiently. "I shall be there quicker if I ride. Besides, I do not want company of any kind."

"Joy!" exclaimed Sibyll, "Colonel Wood will take Mrs. Barker in, and Jack Prendergast will bring in the young lady, and I shall thrust myself on the left of Colonel Wood—he is a *blasé* old fool, but amusing, and better company than Jack Prendergast." She hummed a tune. "Joan, what was that tiff about between you and the daddy?" she asked, so soon as her father had left the room.

"It was due to me. I brought in Mr. Beaudessart, and he did not like it."

"What nonsense! Of course, whenever the hunters come this way we must offer them some refreshment. I don't care whether papa growls and grumps—I shall go on doing so."

"It was the name of Beaudessart that ruffled him."

"A man cannot help his name. And Beaudessart is a good name, and is connected with this place."

"That is just it. You see, Sibyll, we are, though papa may not relish the term, yet manifestly and undoubtedly interlopers. This is a Beaudessart house and estate, that has by some irregularity devolved upon us. I do not quite riddle it out, but as far as I can understand, old Mr. Hector Beaudessart passed over his son, and left the place to papa, although no blood relation whatsoever."

"I will get the new County History that is being issued in parts," said Sibyll; "it is in the room, and our parish comes into one of the earlier numbers. It is kept over yonder."

She went to the bookstand, and drew out some paper-covered, octavo-sized parts.

"Here we are, Joan, and here is a view of the house. What do you want? nothing about the parish, and the church, and all that. Here is Pendabury! Listen! 'Pendabury is a noble seat, formerly in the possession of the Beaudessart family; the mansion stands with its back to a red sandstone hill crowned with entrenchments, supposed to have been occupied by the renowned Penda, King of the Mercians.' We don't want all this. Now to the point. 'This beautiful estate and residence was devised by the late Mr. Hector Beaudessart to his wife's son by a former husband, the present much-esteemed possessor, Martin Frobisher, Esq.' Well, that is all right! It was left to papa, and here papa and we are. What more would you have?"

"Is there a pedigree of the Beaudessarts in the book?" asked Joan.

"Yes, a long one—generations of them, since the Conquest."

"How does it conclude?"

"Here—'Hector Beaudessart of Pendabury, Esq., J.P., D.L., a former High Sheriff of the County, married, in the first place, Prudence, daughter of Herbert Knight, Esq., and had issue Walter of Montreal, Canada, who married Josephine, daughter of Henry Perleux of Les Rapides, Esq., and has issue, in addition to a daughter, Julia, one son, Hector.'"

"That was the young man who helped me home. Go on, Sibyll."

"'Hector Beaudessart married secondly Elizabeth, daughter of Joseph Francis, Esq., and widow of Samuel Frobisher, Esq., and had no issue by his second wife. The estate passed by his will to Martin Frobisher, eldest son of the said Samuel and his wife Elizabeth.'"

"That is our father, and this shows that we are interlopers."

"Interlopers or not, we are jolly comfortable here," said Sibyll. "A blessed thing that old Hector quarrelled with his son, and left Pendabury to papa. I could kiss the old man for doing so."

"But it was very hard on his son and grandson."

"That is no concern of ours. Old Squire Hector had a right, I suppose, to do with the property as he would."

"As things stand, papa did not relish young Mr. Beaudessart coming to see the place."

"It was natural that the fellow should like to take a peep at what his father lost. Not so bad a lot, Joan, that of the cuckoo. Lucky job for us, anyhow. It is an ill wind that does not blow good to someone. Blessed be the east wind that touched up old Hector's liver when he made his testament."

"But Pendabury is left to our father for his life only."

"What, are not we to be co-heiresses?"

"No."

"I call that mean. I could box old Hector's ears for that."

Sibylla threw the parts of the County History on the carpet.

"Joan," said she, leaning back in the cushioned easy-chair, "we shall have rare fun to-morrow. You know there will be a shooting party and a beat of the Bradstreet coverts. We are to lunch in the wood, and then, in the evening, have a dinner. No old fogies and young half-baked lumps of fellows, but really nice people, full—brimming with chaff."

"Yes. I am aware. But, Sibyll, do not leave those numbers of the County History on the floor."

"Why not?"

"Joseph is so thoughtless. When he comes to put coals on the fire he may tread on them as waste paper. Put them back on the stand whence you took them."

"Not I—I am stiff and tired. I will tell Joseph to mind where he treads, and to collect them."

Joan stooped and gathered together half a dozen dispersed separate issues of the volume, and after arranging them in their proper sequence, replaced them on the shelf whence her sister had taken them, in a stand at the farther end of the room.

This done she turned round, and saw something that startled and annoyed her.

"Sibyll, for shame! what are you doing?"

"Only looking at the telegram, Joan. Papa had dropped it under the table."

"Put it down. You have no right whatever to look at it."

"If it had been so particular and private, he would have burnt it or carried it away."

"He was unnerved, and perhaps forgot what he did with it. You have acted very wrongly in touching it."

"I have done more than touch it; I have read it," said Sibyll. "It is from London: 'Willjoens Reef smashed up. J. F. absconded.' J. F. may stand for Uncle James."

At that moment the butler threw open the door and Mr. Frobisher entered in hat, greatcoat, and muffler, and with a whip in one hand.

"Did I chance to leave an orange envelope?" he asked. "Oh!" Sibyll had hastily laid the telegram on pink paper upon the table. "That is what I want, not the envelope."

He took it up with a hand that shook, as Joan observed.

Then without giving final instructions to his daughters, he was about to leave, when Joan said—

"Father, you will try to be back in time for dinner."

"If possible—can't say. Very serious news."

Then he left the room.

Joan went to one of the long windows and looked out. Next moment she saw her father ride past.

"I wish," said she, "that he had not decided on

Fashion. Papa is much troubled in mind, and should have had a steadier horse to ride." Then, leaving the window, she picked up the telegram envelope and threw it into the fire, saying, " Sibyll, I am vexed with you. You know that you did wrong in reading the telegram."

" I don't care," retorted the younger. " Willjoens Reef smashed up. Dynamite, I suppose. J. F. absconded into space, blown up into the clouds, maybe. But no, dynamite strikes downwards. I wonder if J. F. stands for Uncle James. If so, perhaps this telegram promises us relief from his rather tiresome presence and tedious commercial talk. I loathe all that smacks and savours of trade and money-making. It is vulgar."

CHAPTER IV

WITH THE DESSERT

JOAN FROBISHER, having lost her mother when still a child, had been called upon by her father to take that mother's place in social functions, to entertain visitors, to occupy the head of the table at dinners, and act generally as hostess. She was consequently able to discharge her duties with easy confidence. Possessed of good feeling and the tact that springs out of it, she had united in her every requisite that goes to make up a perfect hostess. She was skilful in starting topics upon which she knew that her guests could talk, in maintaining conversation in flow, and by delicate intervention to draw every member of the circle into it.

But on the occasion of the evening after the opening hunt, when the party sat down and her father was still absent, the burden of her task was felt by her as oppressive and irksome; it was with an effort that she discharged even the ordinary formalities.

The obligation under which she lay of apologising for the lack of the presence of the host, and explaining it, was in itself embarrassing and a damper to conviviality. But in addition there was much that occupied her mind, and there were cares that distracted it. She could not shake off the painful impression produced on her by her father's treatment of Mr. Beaudessart. Not only was his behaviour unjust towards him, but it was humiliating to herself. The mortification was the more poignant because she could not but perceive that it was Mr. Beaudessart and his father who were the injured parties, and that her father, her sister, and herself were occupying a position to which they had attained solely through the caprice of a masterful and resentful old tyrant.

She recalled the smile that had played about the young man's lips when she had spoken such bold words about the Frobishers maintaining themselves in Pendabury against all attempts that might be made to dislodge them. He was aware at the time how empty the boast was. She coloured at the recollection that she had made it.

But if thoughts associated with this passage in the day's proceedings were painful, those that concerned the telegram were disquieting. The initials J. F. probably did serve to indicate her uncle, James Frobisher, as her sister had surmised. She knew that he was interested in a gold mine in the Transvaal.

She had not made her uncle's acquaintance till recently—a year ago—as he had been all his time in

South Africa, Australia, Brazil, and California. He had been a wanderer, picking up a good deal of information in his wanderings, but shedding a good deal of the finer qualities of an Englishman at the same time.

He was full of schemes for making money, but none of these schemes as yet had enriched himself; the reason being, as he insisted, that you must have gold to make gold—as you must sow grain to reap a wheaten harvest. As he had been unprovided with capital he had seen others spring into the position of millionaires, and been himself incapable of following them.

He had obtained unbounded influence over her father, whom he had dazzled with his speculative projects.

Certainly Uncle James had been an entertaining man for a while, but wearisome to listen to for long, especially to such as had no money to embark in foreign ventures. Joan had not been able to feel confidence in his integrity. He was too fluent, flexible, and flashy, to inspire trust. There was an apparent lack in him of an indefinable something, and that a something like principle, and there was a shiftiness that implied an absence of strict views as to right and wrong.

Joan had behaved towards her uncle with gracious courtesy, even with friendliness, but without being able to draw to him with affection. On the other hand, Sibyll had treated him with positive rudeness. She disliked her uncle because his conversation was about means of making money, speculation in railways, mines, factories, brandy distilleries, hotels; and Sibyll abhorred what she called "shop-talk."

Joan was disturbed over the telegraphic message, which was curt but significant. She shivered internally with the dread lest her uncle should have been engaged in some equivocal proceedings connected with what he termed the floating of his Willjoens Gold Reef Company, and that this had come to light and had forced him to levant.

She had no real foundation for such a surmise other than the words of the telegram, but she had no trust in her uncle's probity. She feared lest her father might have become entangled in the schemes of his brother.

Joan was proud as she was upright, and the surmise was enough to make her sick at heart; under a placid exterior she was forced to hide the troubles and fears that were distracting her.

The dining-room at Pendabury was a very stately apartment. It was long, lofty, and of a suitable width. The walls were panelled with old deal in immensely wide slabs, so perfectly seasoned and nicely united as to give the impression of each panel being composed of one single slice from a gigantic pine. The panels were enclosed within a moulded framework, and a rich cornice, or entablature, broken by the mitring above pilasters at intervals, divided the walls into sections; this was happily worked in with the rich plaster decoration of the ceiling. The woodwork was painted dark, and against this background the pictures showed to advantage.

The furniture was of mahogany, upholstered with velvet, of a comparatively modern character, and though rich and solid, was not in keeping with the Queen Anne style of the room.

The curtains were drawn; a large fire of logs, backed up with coke, was blazing and glowing on the hearth. The table sparkled with silver and glass and candles, and was rich with colour from the Alamander and Tacsonia blossoms, and wreaths of Smilax that decorated the cloth. The whole afforded a look of comfort, elegance, and wealth such as is seen nowhere so well as in England.

The rector sat on Joan's right hand. He was an amiable, elderly man, with grey hair and whiskers that were white; a man such as an Established Church can alone produce, and produce to an almost unlimited extent; well-bred, well-educated, harmless in life, and best described by a series of negatives. In an Established Church, patrons, whether public or private, whether crown or mitre, chancellor or squire, seek to promote only such men as are colourless in opinion and deficient of independence of character, who they may be sure will give no offence in anything, that the ministry be not blamed, and that they will, in this one quality, sum up all their characteristics.

Mr. Barker, rector of the parish, was a keen angler, an enthusiastic bee-keeper, and a conscientious parish priest.

The party at table was small, and the table had accordingly not been enlarged.

Colonel Wood had led in Mrs. Barker, but Sibyll sat on his left side, and the colonel paid a good deal more attention to her than he did to his partner. He was one of those old gentlemen whose sole idea of conversation with a young woman is banter, the paying of little compliments, the making of little jokes, the talking of little nonsenses, the production of abundant chaff, and the never letting drop one grain of good sense. He was not an unintelligent man by any means, but in the society of young ladies, which was the society he particularly affected, he aimed at laborious silliness.

Joan saw what was going on between the colonel and Sibyll, to the neglect of the old lady—a gentle, charming person, limited in her range of ideas and sympathies, but purely refined and kindly.

It vexed Joan, and she took occasion repeatedly to make a remark to and draw a few sentences from Mrs. Barker, so as not to allow her to feel that she was being neglected.

"In no summer that I have known since I have been here," droned the rector, "has the fern-web been so abundant; I went out one morning through the brakes of *filix mas,* and I believe I was able to detach a beetle from every third leaf. You know, of course, that the coccabundi is none other than the fern-web."

On the side opposite to the colonel, Sibyll, and Mrs. Barker, sat young Prendergast and Miss Foljamb. They seemed to be ill-matched. The young man was fidgeting under his chair with a pet dog that belonged to Sibyll, and which was allowed to go where it liked. He had feebly attempted conversation with the young lady, but she belonged to the intellectual order, and promptly snubbed him.

"You have had no experience with the Röntgen ray?" she asked, fixing him with a hard eye.

"N—no—is it anything a chap can eat?"

"Oh, Miss Foljamb," said Joan, "what a privilege—if you know how to use the X ray. I shall have to enlist your services. Poor Goody Brash has swallowed a paper of pins—as Mrs. Barker can tell you, and we have been in such a way about her. We do not know how to work the X ray, even if we get the apparatus, so as to find whereabouts in her system the pins have distributed themselves. Mr. Prendergast, do tell me how Towzer is. Has the stick of brimstone in his drinking-bowl done him good?" Then she turned her head. "Now, my dear rector—what are the characteristics of the coccabundi?"

Spots of colour burnt in Joan's cheek. She was consumed by an internal fever, and in addition to her own cares, she was fretted at Sibyll's conduct and want of consideration for Mrs. Barker.

The dessert was laid, and Joan was sensible of relief at the thought that in ten minutes the ladies would retire, when Matthews, the butler, came to her side, and said in a low tone, "I beg your pardon, miss, but you are wanted immediately in the hall."

"Will it not do presently? We shall all then be leaving."

"No, miss, it is—it is most particular."

The tone of his voice startled her; she looked up, and saw that the man was not only grave, but was a prey to great agitation.

Instantly rising to her feet, she apologised to Mrs. Barker.

"Prithee excuse me—I am summoned from you—for a moment."

"We may as well all rise," said Mrs. Barker.

"Oh no!—no! I shall be back presently. It may be nothing, but Matthews urges me to go. I ask your pardon, gentlemen, for my momentary withdrawal. Some business that requires my immediate attention calls me away." She left the room, and was in the hall. Then the butler shut the door of communication between it and the dining-room.

Joan saw the groom awaiting her. He touched his forehead. The great hall was but partially lighted with one large coloured lamp, and she could not see the man's face distinctly.

"You have something to say to me, Thomas?"

"Beg pardon, miss," said he; "it's Fashion never could abide the smell or sight of a donkey. There's no vice in him, none at all, but he is terrible nervous."

"But what is the matter?"

The groom again saluted.

"You see, miss, there's a bit of a moon, and the miller's old donkey—it's grey, miss, perhaps you know, and I daresay the heavy dew have brought out the smell rank like, and with the winter coat on him thick. And that there stoopid donkey—nothen else would do, but he must stand in the paddock lookin' out into the road over the gate. The squire, miss, he came trottin' 'ome from Lichfield upon Fashion, and comes round a corner right on that there donkey, lookin', miss, and smellin' orful. And whether it were the looks of him in the moon, or the smell of him in the winter coat and all damp, I can't say, miss; maybe it were both!"

"Well?"

"And up like a squirrel goes Fashion, or rather, fust he jumped sideways across the road, and then up the bank, where he never could hold on, miss, and away he rolls with master, and down he comes into the road; or else whether, when he swerved, master fell off, and afore Fashion went runnin' up the bank"—

"My father!" Joan's heart stood still.

"Well, miss, I'm afraid it's terrible bad. They've took him into the miller's house. But there really is no vice in Fashion—it's all nerves—there never was so timid an 'oss."

The butler, who had been standing with his back to the dining-room door, with the handle in his hand, now came forward, and said—

"Miss, I fear the case is serious—very serious—could hardly be worse."

Joan gasped. For a moment she stood as one stunned, with her hand to her heart. Then she rallied, and walked to the dining-room, the door of which Matthews opened for her.

She stood in the entrance, white as a sheet, her eyes lustrous, yet fixed with horror.

"Mrs. Barker, oh! — and rector—all, please to leave us. There has been an accident. My father; my poor father"—

She did not finish the sentence; her fortitude gave way, and she burst into tears.

But there was no need for her to say more. All understood what was implied but left unsaid.

CHAPTER V

FACING THE WORST

MR. SHAND, the family solicitor, was seated in the library with the two girls, Joan and Sibylla Frobisher, a few days after the funeral. He was a formal man, with the complexion of an underbaked seedcake. The girls were, as a matter of course, in deep mourning. The face of Joan bore the marks of wearing and protracted anxiety. She realised, in a manner impossible to her shallow sister, that a crisis in their lives had been reached. That they must leave Pendabury neither doubted, but Joan shrewdly suspected there were unpleasant revelations that would have to be made shortly, concerning the matter of the gold mine. The younger girl had dismissed the telegram from her thoughts, occupied only with her father's death and funeral, but it was not possible for Joan to disguise from herself that the brief message which had brought about her father's fatal ride to Lichfield was fraught with further trouble. She accordingly fixed her eyes on the lawyer with intensity of attention, and with a heart within her bosom that quivered with apprehension. Nevertheless, she was aware of a sense of relief at the prospect of now at last learning everything, of having her worst fears either dissipated or confirmed. Certainly she could bear that better than prolonged suspense.

"Young ladies," said the solicitor, "I have some very distressing news to communicate. I would have asked the rector to relieve me of a painful duty, but that the matter belongs to my province rather than to his, and that to me alone all the particulars are known." He coughed behind his hand. "After your irreparable loss of a father, which we all deplore, comes a second blow that I fear will also prove irreparable, and will be equally felt, though of a different kind. I presume that you are aware that the former squire — I mean the penultimate, Mr. Hector Beaudessart, left to your father, the son of his wife by a first husband, the enjoyment of the manor and estate and mansion of Pendabury during the term of his natural life, with reversion to the issue, lawfully begotten, of his son Walter, that is to say, to the present Mr. Hector Beaudessart, now of Rosewood Cottage, who was not born at the time that the elder Mr. Hector made the testamentary disposition of his estate. It was never his intention to permanently alienate from his family the property which it had held in possession for many generations, but to mark with his displeasure his son Walter, in a most sensible manner. I use the expression sensible not in its popular significance, but in that which is more legitimate, as implying a manner that would be felt. Whether Mr. Walter Beaudessart's conduct was of a nature deserving of such severe notice, it is, happily, not my place to consider, and therefore I will pass no opinion either upon that or upon the method adopted by his father to emphasise his reprobation. It suffices me to state the fact that Mr. Walter, now deceased, was debarred from entering upon the estate of Pendabury, and from deriving any pecuniary or other advantage from it. Your father, whose decease we so profoundly deplore, had no power left him of imposing any charge on the estate, on behalf of his widow, had his wife survived him, or of any child he might have. Consequently, all that he was able to do, so as to make provision for your future, was to lay by annually a certain sum deducted from the revenues of the property. You understand me, young ladies?"

"Perfectly," said Joan.

"I cry shame on old Hector," said Sibyll; "I should like to poke my parasol through his picture. We have better right to Pendabury than any whipper-snapper from the Colonies, for we were born here."

"If your father had acted in accordance with my advice," pursued Mr. Shand, ignoring Sibylla's words, "you would be now in a very different position from that in which you actually are placed. He ought to have heavily insured his life for your benefit. This, however, he would not do. He preferred to invest his savings. Unhappily, of late, he sold out all his securities, and transferred the proceeds to a gold mine in South Africa, in which your uncle was largely interested, and of the prospects of which he was vastly sanguine. Mr. James Frobisher was a man by nature hopeful and confident, and, to employ a serviceable colloquialism, all his geese were swans. He was assured that the Willjoens Reef was auriferous, and would yield an enormous interest on capital spent in developing it. Your father—whose deplorable decease we cannot forget—implicitly believed in him, and caught fire at the representations of Mr. James Frobisher, when he came to England for the purpose of forming a company for the working of the mine. Your lamented and ever to be lamented father withdrew his money, sold all his investments that were absolutely safe, and yielded from four to four and a half per cent. actually, one only was at three and a quarter, and against my advice, I may say my urgent entreaty, he sank everything he had amassed on your behalf in this South African venture. As I pointed out to him at the time,—you will excuse another colloquialism, though vulgar,—it is ill to put all your eggs into one basket. I need hardly inform you that your father—whom we so profoundly deplore—was not a man to be turned from his purpose when he had formed such."

"Indeed he was not," threw in Sibyll, "and in that my sister Joan takes after him."

"Quite so. And in spite of my grave and reiterated remonstrances, he put every penny that he had saved through twenty-eight years into that—to my mind—most risky speculation. I am sorry to have to inform you that my worst anticipations have been realised. Those who were shareholders, not feeling satisfied with the report that had been received, before embarking further in the matter, privately despatched an expert to investigate the Willjoens Reef. To this I believe your father was either not a party or a reluctant party. No sooner did this independent report reach home—than your uncle disappeared. The report was most unsatisfactory; it represented the estate which was to have proved an Eldorado as practically worthless. It lies outside the fringe of profitable gold-producing reefs. Your uncle, no doubt quite unconsciously, had been associated with a party of eminently unscrupulous men, Jews for the most part, who have been thrusting Willjoens and other valueless properties on the market. Some properties in the Transvaal are gold-producing, because gold is found in them. Such Willjoens is not. Others are gold-producing only so far that gold is got by them out of the pockets of credulous speculators in England and elsewhere—and such gold goes into the pockets of the men who float the concern. I regret to say that such is Willjoens Reef."

"Then, what has become of all our money?" asked Sibyll.

"Gone, young lady. A parcel of unprincipled Jews have it, who will never be made to disgorge. It is lost utterly and beyond recovery."

"What, then, shall we have to live upon?"

"There remains nothing of the accumulations made by your father so sadly removed from us. As your mother had no private means, no income comes to you in that way. You will receive what is brought in by a sale at Pendabury, but that will not furnish a considerable sum. The late Mr. Hector Beaudessart made a list of pictures, books, and the amount and kind of plate, all which he decided were to remain as heirlooms, and were to be inalienable. Consequently, in a sale, only furniture can be offered, glass and china, the horses, carriages, and contents of the saddle-room, the bulbs in the beds and plants in the greenhouses and conservatories."

"Fudge!" said Sibyll, "we cannot possibly live on that. We will cut down the timber on the estate, and raise several thousand pounds by that means."

"You have no power to do so," said Mr. Shand, in dry, monotonous voice. "By your father's most lamentable decease, everything has passed to Mr. Hector Beaudessart except such contents of the house and its appurtenances as are not scheduled as heirlooms."

"I never heard the like. I do not agree to it," said Sibyll.

"Dear Miss Sibylla, your consent is not asked or required. As I have stated, so the matter stands, and is unalterable. To use a vulgarism, for which I know you will pardon me, and for which I apologise beforehand, what can't be cured must be endured. With your leave, Miss Frobisher, I will give notice to the domestics. There will, perhaps, be something in the bank that will defray their wages and the cost of the funeral, and provide for your immediate necessities. The court day for the half-year that terminates at Michaelmas has not yet been held, as a month's grace is always allowed to the tenants. You will be entitled, of course, to the money that then comes in, less certain charges and the payment of property bills out of it. That will be yours, when your father's will has been proved, young ladies. If you will take my advice, you will be so wise as to remove at your earliest possible convenience from Pendabury, and install yourselves in some place less expensive to keep up. To employ a vulgarism once more, for which I crave excuse—you must cut your coat according to your cloth."

"Probably our best course will be to go to our aunts Benigna and Charlotte," said Joan, "our father's sisters at Stafford."

"Aunt Benigna may whistle for me," exclaimed Sibylla. "Why, Joan, you know I could never abide either. Benigna belies her name; she is always scolding and finding fault: she has never a good word to say to one — but harangues and sermonises till it makes one sick. As to Charlotte—she is an old stupid, who smiles and sips tea, and has not an idea in her head."

"I am afraid, young lady," said the solicitor, "that these ladies will be found in no position to receive you. I am apprised that they also have lost everything in this Willjoens Reef. They were talked over by their brother James into intrusting their little fortune in his hands. It is infinitely sad and unfortunately true."

"Good heavens! Poor dear old ladies!" gasped Joan. "At their age, what can they do?"

"That settles their hash," said Sibylla; "so talk no more to me of aunts Benigna and Charlotte."

"Mr. Shand," said Joan, "under the circumstances, what is your advice?"

"A sale of everything that can be sold," answered the lawyer, "is not likely to bring in sufficient to maintain you in even moderate comfort. What your father's liabilities are I cannot yet tell. I greatly fear he has risked money of his own apart from what he had laid by for you, and that this may make a sad hole in the half-year's rent. Have you relatives who would come to your aid?"

Joan shook her head.

"Not one. Uncle James Frobisher is now out of the question. My aunts are also out of the question. I really know of none other—that is, none to whom I would care to apply. My dear mother belonged to the Hopgoods—a respectable but not wealthy manufacturing family. My father kept up no relations with them. He considered that his position debarred him from so doing. I would not, indeed I could not consistently with self-respect apply to those whom my dear father so persistently held all these years at arm's length. To appeal as a pauper to them is more than my pride could endure."

"Do not even think of such a thing," said Sibyll. "I wash my hands of the whole Hopgood lot."

"And your father's family?"

"On that side — no relatives other than Uncle James and my two impoverished aunts."

"There is one thing." Mr. Shand spoke hesitatingly, and looked down on the table as he spoke. "Your case is sure to evoke much sympathy. I do not quite know how you will take it — there is a homely and good proverb—but I will not venture to quote it. I have talked the matter over with the Reverend Mr. Barker, your rector, without, of course, entering into particulars, merely indicating the broad outlines of the case. We both think that under the exceptional circumstances, and seeing how widely respected your father was, chairman on the bench and patron of so many societies for the benefiting of the agriculture, and horticulture, and poultry-raising of the country, that some little collection might possibly be suggested that would be warmly taken up by—of course—the county people to—to"—

"Sir!" Joan flamed through throat, cheeks, and temples. "Not another word to that effect."

"I confess I have no other suggestion to make," said the solicitor.

"I thank you, Mr. Shand. I am glad that you have stated the condition of our affairs so plainly," said Joan. "Practically we are left, if not absolutely destitute, yet without a sufficiency to maintain us, unless we eat up our little capital. That capital, whatever it may prove to be, is best left to fall back upon in an emergency. Now that we know the very worst, there is but one thing that can be done—and that is to face it, and face it with good heart, frankly."

CHAPTER VI

IN THE BEAUDESSART ARMS

ONE morning, a week after the interview with Mr. Shand, the sisters were in their own private sitting-room together.

Joan was putting away sundry trifles that belonged to her, and getting rid of the ten thousand accumulations that gather in a house during a long tenancy. She burned many old bills and letters.

Sibyll was engaged in doing little more than help her sister, by ensuring combustion of bills and letters, by turning them over, or pressing them down among the coals with the poker in her hand.

"I have made up my mind what I shall do," said she. "I shall go a round of visits, and spend my Christmas with the Maleverers. I shall be able to spin out my engagements through the spring and early summer, and by that time something is sure to turn up."

"You cannot do this," said Joan, looking at her sister with surprise; "visiting comes expensive."

"But it will be economy—I shall save my grub with you."

"Dear Sibyll, that is nothing. Visiting will entail a good deal of outlay in dress."

"You would not have me go shabby."

"No—but as Mr. Shand says, 'You must cut your coat according to your cloth.' You must dress as our means will permit. Besides, there are the servants—presents must be made to them—and there is the cost of travelling. Indeed, Sibyll, it is not possible."

"What shall we be driven to do? Go out as governesses? Well, if I can find a nice family, where the children give no trouble and the salary is good, I will even submit to that. Miss Blair did not have a bad time of it with us—only she would so persistently paint and frizzle, and set her cap at papa."

"Sibyll, you have not been educated for a governess."

"Pshaw! I can read and write and spell indifferently well. I am not much of a hand at the piano, but of course I could teach. It only means letting the pupil muddle along at the scales, and you sit by with a novel, and just throw in a word now and then."

"No, dear, you have neither the training nor the application."

"I have as much as most governesses."

"That may be—but the country is overrun with incapables drifting from situation to situation, staying a term in each, till their incapacity has demonstrated itself unequivocally. No—you are not calculated to be a successful governess."

"Then I shall go on the stage. There are pots of money to be made there so long as one is decent-looking."

"The stage is a profession that is most exacting. It demands training and hard work. You know, Sibyll, that you have a woeful short memory. Go on with the beginning of the *Paradise Lost*, from

'Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree'"—

"No, Joan, I detest Milton; you know that."

"Well, then, try something else that you learned quite recently with Miss Blair—

'The stag at eve had drunk his fill
Where danced the moon on Monan's rill.'"

"I have forgotten all that stuff."

"Sibyll, no stage for you. You are as ill-adapted for that profession as you are to be a governess."

"Then I shall become a nurse. Some of the nurses' costumes are quite fascinating, and they have a jolly lively time in the hospitals, I hear."

"My dear Sibyll, you would have to pass through an apprenticeship, scrubbing the floors and doing real menial work, with a chance of being rejected."

"I'm not going to do anything menial. Scrub the floors indeed! Black the medical students boots next! Not I—rather than that I'll marry old Colonel Wood."

"It is not leap year, so you cannot ask him if he will have you."

At this juncture Matthews entered with a salver and presented a note to Miss Frobisher.

"Any answer?" she inquired.

"I really do not know, miss. The boy brought it from the Beaudessart Arms, and said that he had forgotten whether he was to wait for an answer or not."

Joan opened the envelope, which was addressed to her in a feminine hand, and her face at once assumed an expression of surprise.

"In a moment, Matthews. I must consider."

The butler withdrew.

"It is odd," she said, rather to herself than to her sister. "What can she want?"

"Who, Joan?"

"Look yourself at the note." She passed the sheet to her sister.

Sibyll read it, tossed it across the table, and said, "I call that a jolly bit of cheek. If I were you I would not answer it in any way."

"I do not know what she wants. It may be kindly intended."

"Oh, kindly intended indeed! The gloating cormorant! Allow me to go and give her my mind plainly and forcibly expressed."

"No, Sibyll, she asks to see me. I will go, but I do not much like this. Touch the bell."

When the butler reappeared, Joan said, "There is no message. I will answer the note in person."

Then she left the room, dressed to go out, and quitted the house.

As she walked through the grounds along the drive, she could not but wince at the sight of such familiar and beautiful landscape that she would be leaving without a prospect of seeing it again.

Hard by the entrance lodge stood a neat inn, "The Beaudessart Arms," and to that Joan directed her steps. She was immediately admitted to the little parlour, where was seated a lady in widow's weeds. She had abundant white hair, and dark eyes under well-drawn dark eyebrows.

She rose immediately, and advancing towards the visitor, said, "Miss Frobisher."

"Mrs. Beaudessart, I presume."

"Will you take a chair?" said the lady. "I dare-say you are surprised at the step I have taken of driving over from Rosewood, and putting up my cob here, and then sending to entreat your visit. For many reasons I thought it most expedient to adopt this method of communicating with you. Will you not be seated?"

Joan did not accept the invitation; she made a slight apologetic bow, and remained standing.

"Miss Frobisher," continued the widow, in a gentle voice tinged with a Colonial accent, "there are things better spoken between woman and woman than committed to writing, or passed through the medium of a solicitor. It sometimes happens that words at one time read leave one callous, which at another time move one to tears. So much depends on the reader and the mood of the listener. I wish to communicate a proposition, that I prefer should come from my lips to your ear, than that it should reach you in any other way. There has been estrangement, bitterness, in the past, harsh thoughts and resentful feelings have been entertained—but those heads in which the thoughts tossed are laid low, on one side and the other. The hearts that were fired with resentment are both still. There is no reason why we should carry on these same feelings; let them die and be forgotten. Come, I will have you by my side on the sofa." She laid her hand on Joan's wrist, and drew her down.

"I can assure you that my son and I have no other thought towards you than one of deep sympathy and heartfelt goodwill. He has had the privilege of making your acquaintance. I should have gone on my way grieving at not knowing you—and that is one reason why I have been so bold as to ask you to honour me with a visit here."

She retained her hand on Joan's wrist, and looked at her with her kind eyes.

"Miss Frobisher, let me tell you a little about ourselves."

Joan wondered. The lady seemed reluctant to make the proposal she had said it was her purpose to make, and to make which she had driven over from Rosewood.

"When my dear husband was dismissed from home—it was for no wrong done, but because he entertained opinions very different from his father—he went to Canada, and entered a house of business. He was advanced from being clerk to be partner, and realised a respectable fortune, after which he withdrew entirely from business, just before his death. I do not say that what he made was a large sum, so that my son Hector was left a wealthy man, but that he was comfortably off. On account of his expectations in England there was no necessity that he should be put into business. It might have been better if he had been, as then his life would have been less desultory. However, I have not come here to discuss that. My dear husband's one ambition was that Hector should grow up to be a thorough English gentleman, and he was willing—in order to ensure this—to undergo great sacrifices, the greatest of all the parting with his son to be bred in England. However, I have not asked you to meet me that I might talk about my son, but about yourself and your sister. Will you take what I am going to say in good part, as it is intended? We are not relatives, and yet it almost seems as though we ought to be akin. Cannot earth constitute a tie as well as blood? You have been born, and lived on, and have loved Pendabury, where my husband was born and where his forefathers had lived for centuries. And I may say that, separated from it by the wide ocean, deprived of it, he loved it to the last with intense passion. As somehow akin, linked through Pendabury, my son and I consider that we are allied to you. If you will acknowledge the bond, none so gratified and happy as we. Hector thinks, and so do I, that in common fairness, if your father had been given the estate for his life, he ought to have been allowed to charge it to a reasonable amount for his family. It was hardly treating him fairly to deny him the means to provide for his nearest and dearest. Now, Miss Frobisher"—the lady pressed the girl's wrist gently—"you will allow it to be so—let there be a small sum paid over to you and your sister in quarterly instalments; just as your father would have desired had he been able so to arrange it."

"You are very kind," answered Joan, touched by the offer and the way in which it had been made. "I feel unable to express to you how deeply I am moved by your goodness. But do not be angry, do not consider me ungrateful, if I say that I cannot possibly accept this generous proposition.

I tell you, in all frankness, that since I have known how my father stepped into the Pendabury estate, I have felt that a great injustice was done to Mr. Walter Beaudessart. If my father had viewed the matter as I do, he would have refused to profit by the will, and have set himself to work out a career for himself, gone into business, and made his own way to a competence. Actually, the whole twenty-eight years that he lived in Pendabury were years in which the rightful owner was thrust out of the enjoyment of it. He to whom the place properly belonged never had it, and I cannot consent to take anything more out of the estate. I recognise, with all my heart, the kind intent that has prompted you to make me this noble offer, but excuse me if I say that I cannot accept it. Already has Mr. Shand offered to send round the hat among those we have known and entertained and regarded as our fellows. I declined the proposal. The rector has heard of some almshouses for decayed gentlewomen, and has asked me to sanction his canvassing for votes to get me and my sister into one of them—as buxom damsels to figure as decayed gentlewomen. I could not entertain such an idea. I refused that also. No, dear Mrs. Beaudessart, I feel that it is exhilarating, like having the east wind in one's face, to meet the world and make one's own fate, and rely on God, one's stout heart, and ten nimble fingers—but I thank you all the same." And she stood up to depart.

CHAPTER VII

JULIE

"MY daughter Julie, Miss Frobisher."

A young lady entered, dressed as a hospital nurse. She had an oval face, abundant glossy dark hair, that swelled out from under her bonnet, her mother's clear brown eyes, like drops of crystal water over agates, and rather thick dark eyebrows. There was strength in her build, decision in her tread. A look was sufficient. Joan knew that she would like her—indeed, she liked her instinctively already.

"Another of my audacities," said Mrs. Beaudessart. "I made Julie come with me in the hopes of getting you to meet."

"Miss Frobisher, I see, was just about to leave you, mamma," said Julie; "if she does not object, I will stroll with her for a few minutes wherever she is going."

"I am going home—I mean," with a slight flush, "to Pendabury."

"I will accompany you part of the way—if you will allow me," said the nurse.

Joan bowed. She was not desirous of company. She had no wish to extend acquaintance with more of the Beaudessart family—but she could not refuse, and she was drawn towards this girl. Moreover, the thought traversed her brain that, other schemes failing, she herself might seek means of self-support in nursing, although her sister might be unfitted for such a career.

She said, "It will be a real pleasure to me."

As the two girls passed through the gates into the park—for park the grounds might well be designated, though containing no deer — Joan glanced with a transient, and, as she felt, unworthy suspicion at her companion, to see if she were observant of the dignity of the approach to the mansion. But Julie was not looking about her—she kept her eyes on the ground.

"Have you long been engaged in nursing?" asked Joan.

"For three years—that is the time since I entered on probation in a hospital."

"Now, I presume, you will give it up?"

"Oh no! I could not do so."

"Why not? There can now be no necessity for it."

"There has been no pecuniary necessity hitherto. Our means were sufficient without my doing any work. But—there are other necessities that make the work one I cannot abandon."

"I do not comprehend."

"May I tell you a little story of my childhood?"

The clear brown eyes were turned on Joan and met hers, eyes that were limpid wells, at the bottom of which truth must lie.

"It is not much of a story. It would be better to describe it as an incident. Yet it was one that determined the whole course of my life."

"Then it was a first chapter in a story that is slowly unfolding."

"I suppose so. It is nothing in itself—except to me, and to me everything. When I was a little girl at Montreal, my bedroom was at the back of the house, and overlooked a small yard or garden, beyond which was the back of another house, with windows looking into the same yard or garden. In a room that had a window opposite was a woman dying of cancer. All night long there was a candle in her room, and it cast a reflection through my window upon the wall, a little patch of faded yellow light, yet sufficient to tell me, as I lay in bed, that there was someone sick and suffering over against me, across the yard. I did not know at first why a light was always burning in that upper room, but after a while my mother mentioned it, yet not all the particulars. These I learned from some of the maidservants. If I had spoken about the light, they would have removed me to another room, but so soon as I knew why it was there I could not have endured to be taken elsewhere. I became accustomed to lie awake thinking of the sick woman and praying for her. And then, after a while, all night long she moaned, and I could hear her moans. I doubt if she ever slept. If I did, and woke up, I heard her moans again. Sometimes during the day I went into the yard. I heard them in the day. I believe that I became white and worn from want of sleep and fretting over that woman and her terrible pains. My mother did not know what was the matter with me, and I would not tell her, lest she should insist on my removal to another apartment. I should have suffered more elsewhere, knowing that the poor creature was in pain and moaning, and I unable to hear her, and that the light was shining from her window and that I could not see it. I had many and many a cry about that suffering woman. Can you believe it? I once did a very daring thing. I went to the house, without telling my mother, and knocked and asked to be allowed to go up into the sickroom and kiss her. They would not permit me. At last she died—and the light went out."

"And that determined your vocation?" said Joan gravely.

"It did."

"It would have mine—I think—I—I hope," said Joan. "But I have never met with any real case of great suffering. Goody Brash once swallowed a paper of pins, and she is always fussing about them, and sending for brandy, because they hurt her. They are all over her system."

"I was a little thing of thirteen then," said Julie, "but I never have had any other thought since at the bottom of my heart, but to do all I could to help those who suffer, and to comfort those in pain. Now do you see? It matters nothing to me if my brother be rich. I must be a nurse. Do you remember what the apostle says, 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel'? If he had cast aside his work and lapsed into lazy ways and gone into easy quarters, would he have been happy? Woe is me if I do not minister to those in anguish. Have you seen a little skiff when the wind fills the sail, and away it goes, cutting the water? It seems inspired with a life it knew not when rocking listlessly, moored to the quay. So it is with me; a breath, a wind of love swells my heart and carries me forward. I cannot help myself, I must go on."

The girls walked on side by side in silence for some way. Presently Joan said—

"My sister was speaking to me, not half an hour ago, about becoming a nurse. She wished it, but I myself do not consider that she has any real call to, or aptitude for the life."

"It is with the nurse as with the priest," said Julie. "There are many quite qualified to do the hack work of the profession; but then, the nurse and the priest with a vocation, that is something other, it is a soul-absorbing, life-consuming passion, the passion of pity. If your sister be a strong, brave girl, if she has a sunny spirit, by all means let her go into the hospital wards. But to be a real nurse she must be a sister in heart, a sister to everyone whose nerves are wrung; she must weep with those who weep, and her heart must bleed with those who bleed."

"How can you be happy in such a life?"

"Happy!"

Julie turned her face on Joan, and the sunshine seemed to be in it.

"I remember," said the nurse, "reading a story of St. Patrick. He had been a slave boy keeping swine in the oak woods of Ulster in cold and nakedness. He ran away, and managed to get to France; but always he seemed to hear the cry of the little slave boys in Ireland calling to him, 'Come over and help us.'"

They had reached that point whence the house appeared in sight. Julie turned abruptly and said—

"I must go back to my mother. I am not often with her now, and when I am, I do not like to leave her side."

"I will retrace the way with you," said Joan.

Both turned.

"You have met my brother, I hear," said Julie.

"Yes. How does he approve of your being a nurse?"

"Not at all. Our dear father had some old-fashioned English prejudices which he retained in the New World. Although he himself was compelled by circumstances to be in business, yet he never took to it with zest, and he was firmly resolved that Hector should not—as he termed it—soil his hands with trade. So he sent him to Eton, provided him with money, and brought him up to be, what he is, a light-hearted, gracious young man, of blameless life, and living for his pleasures. But one is not compelled to fashion one's life to suit a brother's fancies. I chose my own line. I could not do other. I find no fault with Hector; he did not hear that woman's moans. You cannot answer a call till you have been called."

Again they proceeded in silence. Presently Julie said—

"You must be sad at heart leaving this beautiful place, where you have been so happy."

"Yes, I am sorry."

Then neither spoke for a while.

"I am sorry especially," said Joan, "that I shall not now have the chance of seeing more of you."

"But," answered Julie, "I shall not be here. My home and my work are where things are not smooth and cheerful, but in a world of woes and tears."

"If"— said Joan, and ceased.

"What would you say?"

"If," she recommenced, thus encouraged, "If at any time I should cry out to you, 'Come over and help me!' will you come?"

"I give you my word."

"I shall hold you to it!" And the girls clasped hands.

CHAPTER VIII

A CHANGE OF AIR

NIGHT had fallen, although the hour was but six. The sky was obscure; the line where it ended and the horizon began was smurched with lurid flames from furnace chimneys, and punctured with gas lights from windows. Here and there a disregarded heap of cinders and small coal glowed, sent forth flickers and smoked. Here and there a steam puff trailed athwart the black heavens, partially illumined from below. Here and there flashed green and red and orange lamps.

Joan descended from a train on the North Staffordshire line, that crept from station to station, sown at such short intervals that the engine was unable to get up pace between them.

Little expense had been incurred to make the station beautiful or commodious. It consisted of nothing other than two long sheds and a high-spanned covered footway from one platform to the other; and seemed designed mainly for the exhibition of advertisements of teas, baking powders, and soaps on its long, protracted boardings.

Joan issued from the station, having delivered up her ticket, and stood outside on the causeway of indented tiles. No cab was stationed there to invite a fare, no hotel 'bus was in readiness.

She had with her but a Gladstone bag.

Halting on the pavement, holding her bag, she looked along a road deep in mud, with sparse gas lamps reflecting themselves in puddles.

A few houses, stragglers from the town stretching towards the station, coal and timber and clay yards, a mean public-house, a waggon shed—these were all that were revealed by the artificial light.

There was no distant glow thrown up upon the clouds to indicate the presence of a great town. No great towers and spires visible from the station looming up against the flaring furnace lips and fire tongues, showing where was the nucleus of this busy neighbourhood.

A ragged urchin came up.

"Carry your luggage, miss?"

"How far is it into the town?"

"It's all town. What part do you want to go to?"

"The Griffin Hotel."

"All right you are. A mile and an 'arf, but there's the electric tram."

"But where is the tram?"

"Take you to it for twopence and carry yer bag."

"Very well. You shall have the twopence. How far?"

"Take yer two minutes."

The boy shouldered the bag and slouched away. Presently he turned his head and said—

"The tram 'll take you right past the Griffin. Tell the chap as has yer penny to set yer down there. You'll do it bloomin' cheap, yer will, owin' to me. Threepence. If yer'd had a cab as I see'd yer squintin' about arter, it would a cost yer a bob, and the cabby 'ud a cussed and swore at yer if yer hadn't put on another sixpence, seein' yer to be an unprotected female and a stranger, and the time—night."

He led Joan to a three-cornered paved place where a road came into that from the station, and where she saw the line of rails, and by the side poles with insulators and wires.

In the midst stood a lamp-post with a flickering gas jet in it. The glass was cracked and a chip was out, allowing the wind to rush in and wanton with the flame.

"You're a bag-woman, for 'ere's yer bag," said the boy, planting Joan's luggage under the lamp and seating himself upon it. "But are yer a professional commercial traveller?"

"No, I am not quite that."

"Nobody comes 'ere but commercials. I don't see why the manerer-fact'rin' bosses don't employ young wimen to trot about with their samples. Blowed if I don't think they'd be more persuadin' by long chalks than the men—they would be with me, if good-lookin', as you are."

"You monkey," said Joan, laughing — to be addressed in this off-hand, familiar tone by a dirty street arab was to her a new experience — "You monkey! I suppose you expect another penny for the compliment you have paid me."

"Shouldn't object; and I'll throw yer in my blessin' free, gratis, and for nothin'. I wish yer all 'appiness, and luck whatever yer takes in 'and. I couldn't do it more 'andsome. Here you are with your tram. Jump in with all yer legs, and I'll chuck the bag arter you. Driver, set my gal down at the Griffin, don't forget, or I'll withdraw my patronage."

In the tram were but two persons: a gentleman with dark moustache, bushy dark hair, and restless eyes; the other a young and pretty girl. As Joan saw at a glance, he was annoying her with his attentions. She was a modest and reserved girl, and looked with evident relief at Joan as she entered. Joan grasped the situation a moment after she had seated herself, and then changed her place and planted herself deliberately between the man and the girl he was persecuting. She looked him straight in the face, and he, muttering some remark that she did not catch, drew away.

In about ten minutes Joan descended from the car, when at once the girl followed her, and with a smile said, "I thank you."

Joan then went into an inn that was reputed to be the best in the place, but which made no efforts to assert its superiority to others, and to pretend to be of first or even second class order. She entered a narrow passage with the bar on one side and the "Commercial Room" on the other, and inhaled an atmosphere strongly impregnated with spirits. She looked about her with a feeling of bewilderment for someone to whom she might apply for accommodation.

The barmaid was conversing with a party of commercials in the inner apartment, whence flowed fumes of whisky and tobacco, and issued the clink of spoons in tumblers. She either did not notice the arrival of Joan, or did not consider it worth her while to attend to a mere woman, till she had satisfied all the requirements of the gentlemen in the inner snuggery. Presently she sauntered to the bar with careless indifference of manner, and looked coldly at Joan, then turned her head to respond to some sally from a lively bag-man, and only at last asked superciliously—

"May it please?"—

It was too much trouble to complete the question. Joan, however, readily supplied the answer.

"I shall be glad of a bedroom."

The superior young person rang a bell, and a chambermaid responded.

"Selina, number thirteen!"

Then she sped back to that bosom of conviviality, the inner bar.

The maid took Joan's bag and led the way upstairs to a small, clean bedroom, looked into the jug, and satisfied herself that there was water therein—probably of two days' standing, to judge by the film covering it, lighted a candle, and departed. The idea that hot water might be of advantage did not occur to her. However, after having left the room, she put in her head again and asked—

"A commercial?"

"I have not that honour," replied Joan, and the girl withdrew with a face that showed that Joan, by her disclaimer, had forfeited the sole claim she could have advanced to be treated with respect.

When Joan descended, after having washed her face and hands, opened her bag, and arranged her hair, she again stood in hesitation whither to go, when the maid said—

"Into the Commercial Room, if you please; there's no other sitting-room with a fire. I don't fancy there'll be any gentlemen come in, unless they be teetotallers."

"I should like some dinner," said Joan. "At what hour do you dine?"

"Dinner! Lord keep you! We dine at one o'clock; then's the ordinary."

"Well, call it supper. Can I have some?"

"Certainly; anything you please to command."

"Oh, I do not require much; I would leave it to you."

"Then I daresay we could manage a chop."

Joan seated herself by the fire, put her feet on the fender, looked among the glowing coals, and fell into a dream.

After the deference to which she had hitherto been treated, not only by the servants at Pendabury, but by the villagers, by the entire neighbourhood, by the tradesmen and shopkeepers of Lichfield, this was a strange experience. It did not offend her, it amused her. With her clear good sense she was aware that she could not expect the treatment in a strange place to which she had been accustomed at home, and that in her altered circumstances she must expect new surroundings and an altered tone of address.

She was left undisturbed for half an hour, and then the girl came in to lay the cloth at one end of the table.

About the same time a large-built commercial traveller entered, a man with a profusion of dark hair, with shaven cheeks, but a ring of moustache and beard left encircling his mouth. He seated himself at the table and expanded to fill up the entire extremity, and planted his broad fat hands upon his sturdy knees spread wide apart.

"Now then, Jenny," said he to the maid, "I want supper. I've been tootling about all day and have had no time to pick up more than a couple of sandwiches. What can you do for me, my lass? I'm famished as an ogre."

"Anything you please to ask for," responded the maid.

"Well, then, get me mulligatawny soup, a fried sole, and a little shoulder of mutton with onion sauce. For sweets"—

"Lord bless you, sir, it is past seven o'clock. I don't think it could be done. There's no fish—but we might do you a chop."

"And for sweets?"

"I daresay we could manage some bread and marmalade. What will you have to drink?"

"Two whiskies and a large soda."

"This lady is going to have the same," observed the girl.

Joan glanced up, shocked.

"Not the whiskies, please. I will take tea."

The bag-man looked hard at Joan, and asked in a courteous tone—

"I beg pardon, but are you travelling for any firm? I am in the hardware."

"I—oh dear no! That is the third time I have been asked the same question within an hour."

"No wonder. No one comes to this place except on business. There is nothing to be seen, to attract visitors. It leads to nowhere but to coal and marl pits. I am heartily glad to hear, mem, that you are not in the commercial line. The females are cutting us out everywhere, invading every business, storming every profession. There will be nothing left us men to do presently but manual labour. Our branch has hitherto remained sacred, but for how long? In Shakespeare's days no woman was on the stage, and now women delight in taking breeches parts. It is a complaint made by the men in these potteries—the women are rolling up the carpet from under their feet. If they would remain at home and mind their houses and children and cook the meals, it would be the best for all; but no, they will go into the pot-banks and ruin the men. Female competition lowers the wages. If they would stick to home, the wages of the men would be higher, and the families would be in every way better off."

He would have talked further, never disrespectful, but inclined to be rather more familiar than Joan cared for in a casual acquaintance of the class.

Her supper, consisting of tea and chops, now made its appearance, and as she showed no wish to pursue the conversation, the traveller retired to the bar till his meal was ready. Two small chops were displayed, when a metal cover was lifted, that had not been brightened since it left the shop where purchased; they consisted of much fat and little lean, and this latter underdone. No potatoes were introduced, but a stand of cruets was placed within Joan's reach. It contained a phial of Yorkshire relish with a bit out of the neck, and the contents, very cloudy, had certainly long ago lost all the relish the makers had given it; a mustard pot with a thick discoloured crust and dabs of the condiment on the side, also oil and pepper.

Joan's supper was hardly ended before the gentleman in the hardware line came in, simultaneously with the chops he had commanded. Joan then put on her cloak and hat, and took her umbrella, to sally forth for a stroll. She was tired, for she had had a trying day, but she was not desirous of being drawn into more intimate discourse with the traveller, and she was curious to see something of the place to which she had come, in its night aspect.

The street was alive with people—full of animation. The shops were doing a good business, especially those of the greengrocers and butchers. Young women clustered about the drapers', dressmakers', and milliners' windows, discussing and eyeing the finery displayed.

A party of three girls, arm in arm, swept down the causeway laughing boisterously, and shouting jokes at the young men that passed, and who retaliated in the same vein. Then a band of the Salvation Army made its presence known playing a frolicsome strain, and halted at a corner, where a man addressed those on their way up and down the street, without, however, arresting their attention. The chorus of Hallelujah lasses and lanky, cadaverous-faced soldiers next brayed out a hymn of the most sacred and solemn import, whereupon the children who had congregated round roared out a ribald chorus in parody of the words of the hymn.

Joan hurried past, her gorge rising with disgust, and saw a flaring gas jet above a stall spread with almond rock, barley sugar, and peppermint sticks, the latter composed of twisted strands of rainbow hues. Around this many boys were assembled, greedily eyeing the delicacies.

Joan halted to examine their faces—some clean, but others very grimy—when one urchin looked up at her, laughed, and winking, said—

"That's my gal, as guv me threepence. Twopence for carryin' her bag and one penny for personal complerment. I say, I'm enj'yin' myself amazin' out of them pennies; that I am, just about. Look 'ere." He held up a stick of peppermint and broke it in half with his dirty hands. "I say! 'ave an 'arf? I give it you with all my 'eart, for a liberal young female you be. Take it."

"You are very good," said Joan, with a natural shrinking. "I will not deprive you of it."

"Oh, take it and welcome. It'll make it all the sweeter to me to share with you. Don't say you're too proud, and make a chap blush for your bad manners."

"I am not too proud," said Joan, smiling, and taking the proffered bit of sweetstuff. It was very sticky, and the boy found some difficulty in disengaging his fingers from it.

"Now look 'ere. Clap it into yer mouth, and let me see yer suck and enj'y it."

And Joan did as desired.

"You're a good un'," said the imp.

Then he suffered her to proceed.

A rapid turn in the street brought her into a throng of a different sort, composed of interested spectators gathered in a ring about a woman prostrate on the ground, whilst another vociferated in coarse and strident tones, and gesticulated excitedly, by her brogue clearly an Irishwoman.

"The loidy gave me a black oie. Bedad, you wouldn't have me stand that, would you? So I gave the loidy back what she gave me, and wid interest. There she loies. You may pick her up now and teach her 'ow to address a loidy another time."

Joan worked her way energetically through the crowd; such a spectacle, which afforded absorbing interest to others, revolted her as greatly as the holy profanities of the Salvation Army.

She reached the highest point in the street—came out upon a square, or open area, irregularly shaped, from which radiated narrow streets, diving downhill, and becoming apparently dirtier and more shabby as they led away from the centre.

From the point where she stood she could look over ranges of small houses—as she judged by the lights from their windows, and above them wavered and flared the streamers of fire from the furnaces in full blast.

She stood a moment looking, observing, wondering.

Then she returned to her inn, took her candle, and retired to bed.

Long into the night sounded the tramp of feet and the clatter of tongues in the street, broken now and then by the shouts of men and women quarrelling, by the disjointed strains of tipsy men in song, by the screams of bold girls, by the grind when the electric tram passed, and by the tolling of its warning bell. Verily Joan was in a world undreamt of by her at Pendabury, and in an atmosphere wholly new to her experience.

CHAPTER IX

POLLY MYATT

ON the following morning, having had her breakfast, Joan Frobisher left the Griffin, with the purpose of finding a cottage which she could rent for herself and her sister.

After much consideration, she had come to North Staffordshire, to the pottery district, in the hopes of obtaining employment as an artist on china. She was skilful with her pencil and brush, and she had attempted painting on biscuit china, which had been subsequently fired. Some of her achievements in this department had furnished stalls at bazaars, and had even sold.

It was a moot point with her, whether to obtain employment first and take lodgings after, or to look out for and secure a house previous to making application for work. She had turned the alternatives over in her mind, and had resolved on first finding suitable quarters. Should she obtain a place in a workshop for porcelain painting, she would desire at once to enter on it, and not be then put to the difficulty of securing a habitation.

The pottery district in North Staffordshire forms a belt of seven miles in length, nowhere exceeding two in breadth; beginning with Tunstall and ending with Longton, and running from north-west to south-east.

In addition to the two places above named, it comprehends as well Burslem, Hanley, and Stoke. It consists, in fact, of certain centres of shops and public buildings, with intervening tracts of streets, collieries, factories, and furnaces, and occasional intervening fields. The streets are composed of thoroughfares between dingy cottages, with volumes of smoke rolling over and frequently enveloping them. The pottery ovens rise hardly higher than the ridges of the roofs of the houses, and when they are heated, and there is some wind, then, during the forty or sixty hours of firing, the houses to leeward are involved in coils of smoke that fill every crevice with grime.

Fortunately the pottery district lies high, between five and six hundred feet above the sea, and catches every wind. This prevents the burden of coal smoke from hanging over the region in black or brown fog as in London. But it is a cheerless district, where the eyes have no objects to rest upon that produce delight. The public buildings are as though moulded out of soot, and smuts hang from their cornices as a fringe. Such trees as exist have trunks of ebony, the sheep in the pastures bear blackened fleeces, such leaves and flowers as grow—they do not flourish—soil the fingers that pluck them. The sky is never wholly blue, the water never crystal clear, the earth is heaped with refuse, the very air is never uncontaminated.

Only at night, when the banners of flame flaunt in the sky, and ten thousand lights sparkle in the habitations of men, does the country assume some pretence of picturesqueness; but then it is the picturesqueness of an Inferno. If the belt consisted of potteries alone, its dinginess would not be so considerable, but it is bordered with collieries and foundries, and tile and brick works.

Joan walked about the town, past row after row of low dwelling-houses, and noticed that they were all constructed on one pattern—at the most slightly varied. They presented to the street a face in which opened a door, with one window beside it, and in the upper storey two windows, one of which was above the door. Not a house had more than ground floor and one storey over it. None had attics above, nor gardens before them. The only attempt at these latter were facing the houses of the parson and doctor, and in each case was a failure, nothing showing therein save naked soil, or at best mangy turf.

Joan found that there were houses more commodious in the suburbs, also small, and, as far as she could judge, possessing the advantage of a lobby into which the front door opened, instead of opening immediately into the kitchen. These houses were new, and had been secured and entered into so soon as mason and plasterer had turned out.

The streets formed by these new habitations had not been paved as yet; the ruts remained formed by the waggons that had brought the bricks of which the houses were made, and the clayey soil, churned by the feet of the horses, was resolved into adhesive mud.

Joan passed huge marl pits of vast depth and circumference, craters out of which the clay had been drawn for the making of the coarser pottery for drain pipes and chimney pots. Beyond this region she got among collieries and furnaces, and consequently turned back.

The streets were well-nigh deserted. No business whatever was being transacted in the shops. Vans lumbered by conveying cases laden with earthenware, that was being taken to the railway; or waggons ascended from the canal charged with china-clay brought by water from Cornwall.

The electric tram travelled, but the car was occupied by only a stray commercial traveller. No young people were about, save the children swarming in the playground of the school, and a prodigy of piety, a converted boy of fourteen, who stood before a chapel admiring a poster twice as tall as himself, that announced he was to preach and conduct a revival on the ensuing Sabbath.

Joan gravely questioned whether it would be safe to venture on one of the bran-new houses only completed at Michaelmas. No such scruple seemed to have occurred to the minds of others, or hard necessity had driven them to risk health and life; for almost every new house was already occupied. One, indeed, she noticed with a dab of whitewash on the window pane, indicating that it was but just out of the tradesmen's hands. She ventured to the glass of the bay window and looked into the room, and saw the new plastered wall exuding drops, which here and there had run together and trickled down, leaving trails like snail-tracks.

Reluctantly she turned back from these more attractive houses, and entered the town itself, and wandered up and down its many streets, all stricken with the same monotony and the same meanness, only relieved by the long walls of some great pottery.

At last she saw a corner house, that was untenanted, and bore the ungrammatical notice in the window—"To let. Inquire next door."

The house was humble, but not out of repair, and certainly did not contain many rooms. After slight hesitation Joan tapped at the door of the adjoining cottage.

A girl opened, and before addressing her looked her critically up and down.

"What do you want here?" she asked presently.

"The house next door is to be let. It is my wish to look over it. Have you the key?"

"Yes, I have. It is just a fellow to this house, only that it is turned t'other way on. Our door is on the left hand and the window beyond that, and in No. 16 it is right hand—that's the difference."

"But you will allow me to step within, will you not?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Frobisher, and I am on the lookout for a small house for my sister and myself. As you see, I am in mourning. We have recently lost our father."

"Is your mother alive?"

"No; she has been dead these many years. We are left badly off, and shall have to work for our livelihood."

"What are you going to do? Take in needlework or trim bonnets? You look like a dressmaker. There's a living to be picked up that way. The girls here dress a lot."

"I cannot say what my sister may do, but I, for my part, intend to go into a pottery."

"Pottery!—potbank you mean. Come in, and sit you down. We'll talk a bit. What makes you think of going into a potbank?"

"I can paint flowers."

"Oh, on paper, maybe. It's another trick on pots."

"But I really have done a little that way."

"Now look here," said the girl—"there, take a seat. Was your father a Staffordshire potter?"

"No; he was a Staffordshire man, but he lived at some distance from this."

"Then it's no good your thinking of it. We have been brought up to it from babies. They do tell there have been potbanks here for hundreds of years, and our people been at it for generations; and the little ones take to it naturally, as ducks to water and cats to milk. But for a stranger"—she shrugged her shoulders and gave a contemptuous sniff—"you'd best turn to dressmaking."

Joan looked at the girl; she had red hair, was deadly pale, with ashen lips, and her right hand was paralysed.

"You are not well, I fear," said she gently.

"I—I'm poisoned."

"Poisoned?"

"Ay, with the lead."

"How so?"

The girl looked hard at Joan.

"You're as green as a Whitsuntide gooseberry," she said. "I've been a ground-layer—that's how it came about. In time we are all poisoned. Look at my hand. It was like yours once, but it has dropped at the wrist, and I can't work with it any more. So it's up with me."

"I do not yet understand."

"Well, you are soft not to know that. There's lead in the dust, lead in the glost, and the lead gets into us through the eyes and ears and nostrils and the pores of the body; it gets into your hair; it gets into the lungs and into the blood, that turns to goulard water, and then you have the colic and are crippled with the palsy, and sometimes you die of it."

Joan looked at her with eyes dilated with horror.

"But all are not so?"

"Oh no, not all—only the ground-layers and the dippers. But then there be towers—they get the potter's asthma."

"Is there nothing to be done for you? Cannot the doctor put you to rights?"

"Me!—never get my hand to work—never. But for the rest, to drive the lead out of you, some say suck lemons.[1] Lemons cost a penny a piece, and it would take five or six to make a good squash. How can I afford a couple of squashes in a day? Then others tell—drink no end of ale and get boozy on it, and it'll clear away the lead. That's what the men say as an excuse for becoming fuddled. I find it's not only the dippers that take too much beer. Others say take a pint of raw milk morning and evening. A pint of raw milk! Why, that's as much as supplies a dozen houses for their tea. And where am I to get real genuine raw milk from—a quart a day? It's got wonderful like sky-blue, the milk has, when it comes to our street. So—do you want to see No. 16? Come along then — I've got the key."

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[1] It is a delusion to suppose that lemons are of use against plumbism. What is effectual is sulphuric acid, diluted. This forms with lead an insoluble salt, which is carried out of the system.

"I do wish to look at the house, for indeed I believe I shall take it Will you mind my asking what is your name?"

"Me!—I'm Miss Myatt."

Joan smiled.

"What are you a-larfing at?" asked the pale girl, suspiciously and angrily.

"I am smiling to think of us two being next-door neighbours, and seeing one another every day, and being Miss Frobisher and Miss Myatt to one another."

"Get along, then. I'm Polly Myatt, and what be you?"

"I am Joan Frobisher."

"All right. Here's the key. Hope we shall be neighbours. I like you, though I can see with half an eye as you are not one of us."

CHAPTER X

LEAD

"I'LL let you in," said Polly Myatt.

She led the way to the adjoining house, turned the key, and threw the door open.

"We just keep the key hard by to save trouble," she said. "But you must apply to Butcher & Co. for terms and take. This is an end house, and there was a bit of space not to be had for the others, so they gave a passage with a stair in it. But you'll have to pay extra for that—I bet my bones, old Butcher will frank you if he can."

Joan went over the little house. It needed whitewashing and fresh papering in the parlour or front kitchen, but when furnished it would serve.

"I shall take it," she said.

"Well, I'm glad to have you come by us," said Polly. "Now you'll be wanting beds and chairs and other sticks. Shall you go on the hire system or buy right out?"

"I shall buy."

"It is best in the end. I've nothing partic'lar to do, so I'll go with you and show you where you can buy cheap. How much brass shall you spend?"

"At the outset no more than is absolutely necessary. I can add more furniture after I have found work."

"That's right — come now along with me into No. 17 and take a snapping. I've got the kettle on the hob, but I ain't got no milk."

"I shall be happy, and much obliged to you."

"Oh, there's no call for that. You'll have to pay Butcher & Co. a month in advance. They are not trusting innocents."

Joan followed her new acquaintance into No. 17.

Along with freedom of speech and bluntness of manner, there was no little kindliness in the pale, red-haired girl. If the difference in the way in which she was addressed and treated startled Joan, it did not disconcert her. She knew that the manner in which she would be treated must be in accordance with that in which she met little advances made to her, and answered such as questioned her. She was wholly prepared to do her utmost to gain the good opinion of those with whom she was likely to be associated. There was a crispness in the social atmosphere that she felt was stimulating, and there was the novelty of new acquaintanceship that was interesting.

"Now you just turn this over. A hint is as good as a blow to a wise horse. If I was you and loved a quiet sleep and pleasant dreams, I would not take the front bedroom over the passage. There's a four and half brick and no more between that room and the chamber mother and father have in our house. You see father has the ovens to fire, and it's hot and trying work, tending the fires. It's not always, but just off and on, that father comes home the worse for liquor. He's lively then, and mother she lays on with her tongue, and he answers, and there's pretty games I can tell you. Well—it's p'r'aps amusing for the first hour, but you get stalled the second, and the third you'll be swearing at 'em through the four and half wall. Father's a tidy old chap in general. But we've all our little failings, and that's just what makes the difference between us and the angels."

"I cannot understand," said Joan, as she sat over the fire sipping tea, that was mainly tannin, so long had the pot been stewing on the hob, "I cannot understand why you are allowed to poison yourself. The manufacturers should not suffer it."

"Bless your boots! the thing has to be done, and someone must do it. The public will have their ware glazed and coloured, and there is now quite a run on majolica, which is worse than all. We must find them what they demand. If we do not the Germans will do so."

"But are not means taken to prevent these consequences?"

"They do what they can, but they can't do everything. In the little potbank it is worse than in those that are big. At Fenning's they have fans to carry off the dust, and they do tell me that the Government are going to insist there shall be fans everywhere. But even with fans, all is not swept away. Nigh on half of those who do the painting and gilding and ground-laying are short-sighted. We begin as kids, and with looking close at what is under our noses, it makes our eyes come so. You'll see—a lot have to wear spectacles, but a girl won't wear them unless she's forced to it. Well, that means that those who are ground-laying lean over their work, and so they get the lead into them. There are respirators. But if you breathe through them all day it is like to bring on asthma. Then we are a careless lot. They are making a fuss now about our taking our meals in the workrooms—that is what we always used to do—and in the little potbanks I don't see how they can do any other. It isn't everywhere you can have a separate room in which the girls can get their breakfast and tea—and of course by right we should always wash our hands before eating. But some are so daring and so thoughtless, that I've known one girl as licked her hand, that was blue with dust, just out of display of bravery."

"This ought not to be allowed."

"Bless your life! you must have nurses to attend on everyone, and see that they keep to the regulations. We don't want to have that — no thank you."

"But what is this ground-laying, as you term it?"

"I'll tell you what it is. Say you have a bit of ware—a cup, or a saucer, or a vase, or a teapot—to cover with colour, all over, or, maybe, all but where there are to be flowers in gold or other colour. Well, then, we paint in the pattern first in treacle and water, and then cover all with the oil or medium. So soon as this is done, with cotton wool we take up powder-paint and dab it all over the surface, till it is completely and evenly covered. And it is in doing this that the dust flies. There is lead in the powder to fix the colours. When all is covered, then the pot is fired — and the flowers come out white, but the ground is fast. Then next the flowers and sprays are painted in. Do you see?"

"Yes," answered Joan. "I can understand. The colour dust is an impalpable powder, and is applied by means of cotton wool. In so doing, much becomes detached, floats in the air, and by this means is absorbed."

"That is just it. They are now trying a plate of glass between the work and your eyes, but Lord love your bones! one can't manage with that for long. The dust lies on the glass so that we cannot see what we are doing, and if we wipe it there is a smear; and if you're doing piece-work, you can't spare the time to clear the plate of glass, and you just do without it; and if you do try to clear it—why, it sets the dust flying again."

"The manufacturers should refuse to produce this ground-laid ware."

"The public insists on having it, and will pay for it—better the money come to us than go to the Germans. The pay is too good for us to let that slide."

"But you are selling your very lives."

"Well, we have a short life and a jolly one."

"How old are you?"

"Going four-and-twenty."

"And I am twenty-three. We are of the same age, and see how strong and hale I am, whereas you—oh, Polly! Polly!" The tears came into Joan's eyes.

"Blazes!" exclaimed the paralysed girl; "don't look so scared. I need not have gone into the ground-laying unless I had liked."

"Then why did you do so?"

"There—I don't mind telling you. It was all along of a sealskin tippet."

"What do you mean?"

"It was so—Jessie Armstrong got a muff of sealskin and her hat trimmed with it too—and my word and bones! she was a duchess. She was setting her cap at Jack Duncalf, and thought she'd compass and captivate him with them there muff and trimmings. Jack, I had a notion, rather liked me, and I wasn't going to let Jessie carry him off just with sealskin muff and 'at. But Jack was that deep, no girl knew where his real fancy lay. I was that mad jealous, that I went into the ground-laying and high wages, because I vowed I'd out-sealskin Jessie Armstrong. And I did—I got a tippet. I've got it still, but I didn't get Jack Duncalf. He went and married Eliza Bowers."

"And so you cast away your health—perhaps your life—for a sealskin tippet!"

"I've got the tippet still."

"But your health is gone."

"Ah!" said the girl, with an air of triumph, "I intend to have a grand funeral. My mother will raise a pound or two on my tippet. Folks are getting mighty particular over us girls that are lead-poisoned, and we're all inquitched when we die, and the coroner sits, and there's full accounts in the papers. Oh my! that will be fine; a column and a half on the inquitching of Polly Myatt. But the pity is that I shall never see it; only it will be a satisfaction to mother and the rest of the family to have my name in print. And that's sure to draw a lot of folks to my burying, so the sealskin tippet will come in handy then."

"My dear Polly," said Joan, "this is poor satisfaction. Have you no expectation of recovery?"

"Recovery! What's the good of me recovering with my useless hand? That I'll never get right even if I get over the lead in my blood. Some say that I ought to go right away and have fresh air and country runs, and plenty of milk and eggs. But Lord love your bones! how is that to come about? And a pretty lump I'd remain with one hand good for nothing."

Joan studied the fire, and Polly noticed distress in her face.

"There," said she, "it can't be helped. We're born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards; that's Scripture. Now about yourself. You want to get into the works, do you?"

"I do indeed, Polly. I must do something to earn my livelihood, and I cast about, and could think of no better way than this."

"You'll not find it so easy as you suppose. You're too old, for one thing. Our girls begin very young. You'll have to be apprenticed and receive a small wage for the first few months. A young girl, till she is seventeen, pays half her earnings, and then one-third till the last year. Or, look here, every pattern is priced, so much painting or gilding. Work done in the week is entered in the workers' book and reckoned up to indicate wage to be received. But so long as you're an apprentice, so much is deducted from the wage. If, for instance, a half-price apprentice earns ten shillings, five shillings will be taken off; when it's fourpence, there'll be six-and-eight; and twopence, there'll be eight-and-four. Unless you have some money of your own to help you, you will not be able to live on what you earn till you are out of your apprenticeship."

"Well, I shall have to draw on that which I have. Can I get into the bank?"

"If you have some money, that's made the matter easier. I'll see you through, I will, I will indeed."

CHAPTER XI

MY PAL

IT afforded sensible delight to Polly Myatt to be allowed to assist Joan in the furnishing of No. 16, after it had undergone preliminary whitewashing. She bustled in and out, and, so far as her strength permitted, helped in the arrangement of the articles sent from the shops. The energy of her mind was out of all proportion to the capacity of her body.

Joan's ideas of what were necessary transcended those of Polly, who deemed it incumbent on her to check her friend's tendency to too lavish expenditure. But indeed, No. 16 was supplied with only what was necessary, though Joan and Polly differed somewhat occasionally as to what constituted necessaries. Joan hankered after a carpet for the little parlour, but Polly would not hear of such extravagance. She had taken the idea into her head that Joan was in extremely reduced circumstances, and that it was her duty to restrain Joan's outlay. A cocoa-nut fibre matting was finally determined on as a compromise.

No difference of opinion manifested itself as to the absolute and supreme necessity for looking-glasses.

The daily work in the potteries, exacting cleanliness in person and in manipulation, has induced those engaged therein to be scrupulous about having their houses neat.

The home of the Myatts was no exception. Although in it no article was new, yet everything was kept in order and was clean, save only from the all-pervading and unavoidable grime of the ingrained soot. To see the adjoining habitation fresh with limewash, and stuffed with articles new from the shops, afforded Polly a pleasure that found expression in repeated bursts of laughter. By Joan's readily granted permission she was enabled to bring in her father and mother to contemplate and admire what was partly the achievement of their daughter.

The Myatt *père* was a man employed on firing the ovens, and the duty held him often occupied throughout the night. It is a duty very responsible, as on the proper maintenance of the heat and its intensity depends the result of a whole oven's packing. An oven for biscuit china has to be fired for sixty hours, one for glost, or glazing, for forty.

He was a strongly built man, with a thick black "Newgate collar" under his shaven chin, and with a bald head between two bushes of hair above the ears. His wife was a washed-out woman with faded eyes and pallid complexion, who appeared to have had everything boiled out of her except temper, and to have lost all power except that of giving tongue; and that was evidenced by the crows' feet about her mouth and the twitch of her vixenish lips.

The man, on the other hand, bore the appearance of being heavy and placable. Both regarded Joan Frobisher with covert suspicion. They readily detected that she belonged to a class superior to their own, and had ideas of a different order to theirs. This mistrust rendered them awkward in her presence. But Polly partook of none of this. She regarded herself as a patroness, to whom Joan owed her introduction to No. 16 and to the cheap dealers in furniture, and to whom a moderating influence was due, that had delivered Joan from extravagant expenditure.

Among those occupying the street, who manifested considerable interest in the proceedings in the corner house, as with her own people, Polly was a stout champion to her friend.

All the inhabitants of the thoroughfare were acquaintances of Polly, and into intercourse with them all Joan was drawn by her companion. She was soon on speaking terms with every inhabitant of her own sex, and with some of the other as well. Although aware that she was observed critically and with some dubitation, she encountered no unfriendliness from the women or lack of respect from the men.

At night, when Joan lay on her bed, all alone for the first time in her life in a strange house, she was able leisurely to consider her new surroundings, and gauge her own capacity for accommodating herself to them.

There was much that met her eyes and ears wholly unfamiliar, and some things jarred with her high-strung refinement.

The town was sordid, the streets shabby, the houses very small. So far as she was able to judge, it was not inhabited by any gentlefolk, as she understood the term, except by a parson or two and a few medical men, and possibly by a lawyer.

Those who lived in the best houses—houses of more than a ground floor and one upper storey, and who had a room on each side of the front door, were also those who worked least, the better-class shopkeepers, such as did not live above their shops. But of these there were few. As to the owners of the tile-yards, the potbanks, and the collieries, they had mansions far away in the country, among trees and flowers, and went to their business by train.

Living where she had chosen to live, living in the manner she had elected, and among such as necessarily must be her daily associates, she would be as absolutely cut off from the society of those of the class to which she belonged by birth and culture as if she had been wrecked on a South Sea island, peopled only with dusky natives.

Perhaps one of those elements most difficult to which to accommodate the taste is dialect. But some dialects are vulgar and repugnant to the refined ear, and others are not so. To this latter class is the common speech of Staffordshire. It is singularly pure. It bears a Northern intonation that is pleasing and never grates, and possesses none of those elements of defective or distorted pronunciation that characterise the vocalisation of a Cockney.

Joan had already noticed, as regards the external appearance of the people, that dark hair prevailed, and that those employed in the potworks were curiously short in their lower limbs. This was probably due to sedentary habits from an early age. They might have long backs, but their legs were disproportionate.

Joan, with cool, clear sense reviewing all that had come under her observation, was well aware that she would be deprived of a thousand things that she would miss, and which hitherto she had considered indispensable. But she saw with equal distinctness that by the change she would not be the loser. Hitherto, she had known nothing of that part of humanity which earns its daily bread, save only what she had seen of the sleepy rustics about Pendabury, and these she viewed from a towering height, which had rendered her incapable of understanding them as they understood one another.

Now she was about to become a worker among working people, and she foresaw that the study of the class into which she had entered was such as would prove of engrossing interest. One fact had already impressed itself deeply on her—that human nature was much the same in every class. As some little act of kindness, some token of delicate courtesy, was done or shown, there swelled in her heart a thought of grateful surprise—and the words of the sacred text recurred to her reiteratedly—

"He hath made of one blood all . . . men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."

"Polly," said Joan, "I am ready to start in quest of a situation. The house is in order, and I must now see to getting work."

"Where do you think of trying?"

"I shall go from one potbank to another; I shall try great and small. It will be strange if I do not find a gap into which to step."

"I will go with you. Try Fenning's. That's where I worked, and there they know me. Father is there as well, but mother is at Popplewood's."

"It is the same to me where I begin, but I should naturally like to be where you are known and esteemed, Polly. Your good word would go a long way in making my lot comfortable."

"Well, I don't say I can't do something for you. I'll take you to the office. You must ask for Charlie Mangin. He's the head bailie that runs the show for the Fennings."

Joan was dressed in preparation, in a very plain black stuff gown, and with a black straw hat on her head. Under one arm she carried a portfolio, and in one hand a basket.

Polly led the way through the deserted streets and along the blank wall of a chinaware factory, whence issued no whirr of machinery, making the walls vibrate. The building seemed to contain no life.

Polly led down a side alley, and then up a flight of steps in a building, where there were glazed tiles casing the walls. At the summit was a glass door.

"Here you are," said the girl. "Ask to see and speak to the manager."

Joan thrust the swinging door open, and preceded Polly within. A clerk looked up.

"What do you want?"

"Kindly allow me a word with Mr. Mangin."

"He's busy. You must wait."

Then the clerk resumed his ledger-work, and Joan retreated to where Polly was seated on a bench by the wall.

A moment later a man came from an inner room and spoke with the clerk about some letters to be entered. Joan at once recognised him as the person who had given annoyance in the tram, and between whom and the girl he was persecuting she had interposed. Polly nudged Joan, and whispered—

"That's Charlie Mangin."

As the clerk did not inform the manager that there was anyone desirous of seeing him, she ventured to step forward and catch his eye. Mr. Mangin looked at her, somewhat rudely, but without recognition. He said—

"Well, what?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," answered Joan; "will you allow me a word with you?"

"What about?"

"If you please, I have come to ask for employment as an artist."

"Do you belong to a potter family?"

"No, but I can draw. I have brought a portfolio of my flower subjects. Will you be so good as to look at them?"

She opened and exposed some of her sketches. Very delicate and charming they were.

"Oh!" said the manager, "these are no good at all. It's one thing painting on paper and another on chinaware."

"But I have already essayed that. In this basket I have attempts made on biscuit ware, afterwards burnt—I shall be glad to show them to you."

She drew from the basket a cup and a saucer, the sides decorated with geraniums, in wreaths.

Mr. Mangin took up one of the articles with a contemptuous shrug and a purse of the lips.

"This is amateurish stuff—all bad—no use in the least. You don't know the trade, and we don't require you."

"Then if I cannot paint, will you take me into some other department? I will do anything to which I am set."

"Ground-laying?"

"Ground-laying rather than nothing at all. I will take the lowest and worst-paid place sooner than none at all."

"No good—you're too old. We like to begin with the very young. They grow up to understand it."

He turned away, thrusting the cup and saucer from him slightingly.

"Mr. Mangin," said Polly, rising from the bench and stepping forward. "She's my pal. You must give her a chance."

"What!—you here again, Polly Carrots? Not to get into the bank once more?"

"No chance of that," said the girl, and held up her disabled hand. "No. My work is over."

"You should go away, Polly. Get you to the seaside for a while, or up into the moorlands. In time it will work off."

"Bosh! How am I to do that?"

"I daresay we could procure you a ticket to some seaside home or convalescent hospital. I know that Messrs. Fennings subscribe"—

"Oh yes! you want to have me out of the way lest it go worse with me. I get the colic and die and be inquitched, and so am put into the papers. Bless your bones! there was a socialist chap down our street yesterday, picking up copy, as he called it, and put all sorts of questions to me about the lead."

"You kept your mouth shut, I hope?" exclaimed the manager.

"I did. But Lord! I might have told tales. I'm not that sort. If I have to talk, I'll do so to the Government Commissioner when he comes, and I hear he's on his way. Then there'll be ructions."

"Polly, you are not such a fool!"

"Not I. I know who is doing us to death. It's not Fennings, nor Popplewoods, nor Dunscumbes—'tis the general public. Never fear—I'll say naught. But there—if I oblige you so far, you oblige me. Take my pal."

"Well, Polly, this I would do, but she knows nothing."

"Save your holy bones!" said the girl, "I'll tell you what I'll do. Let me have home some of the ware and paints. If I can't lay on colour myself with this crippled hand, I can insense her how to do it. Come—you'll not deny me this, and when the Commissioner comes I'm sure to be in our back yard hanging out the clothes."

"Well, Polly, I'll take your pal, as you call her, on your terms."

CHAPTER XII

BUTTER

JOAN'S sitting-room, converted into a workshop in which, under Polly Myatt's instruction, she mastered the technicalities of painting on biscuit, by little and little became in the evening a place of rendezvous for girls.

At first they came shyly, on various excuses, and only such appeared as could claim intimacy with Polly. But these brought others, and a speaking acquaintance with Polly soon served as an introduction. What began by little and hesitatingly, grew to be accepted and customary. Joan refused none; she was pleased to see them drop in, linger, and gladly accept an invitation to stay. They sat about the fire, they talked, joked, asked questions, and passed opinions.

They were good-natured, simple, and wholesome-minded girls, whom it was impossible not to like. Their manners were brusque, but this only showed the clearer how sound at heart they all were. Their conversation was largely composed of banter, and what was not banter concerned their work and their associates.

Joan was adaptable, and easily fell in with the prevalent tone. She played her small jokes on each, and this readily dissolved restraint, and put all on terms of easy friendship.

There were differences in character among the girls. Some were still and self-contained. Such was Cissie Averill, who liked to sit on a stool in a corner, with her oxlike eyes fixed on Joan, and could hardly be induced to speak. But then she was white and frail in health.

Others were somewhat noisy in talk and laughter—as Bessie Callear, a girl with a round, rosy face and dancing eyes, who could hardly keep her hair tidy, and who had the pleasantest dimples, that were incessantly forming in her laughing cheeks. And others, again, were prim and formal in mind and manners and person, as Margaret Pointon, a handler. Perhaps incessant daily, hourly forming of one sort of article, the handles of teacups, had made her a mere creature of routine.

"You've got a sister, Polly says," observed Bessie. "Is she older or younger than you? and is she jolly?"

"She is younger, only eighteen; as to whether she is jolly, judge for yourself—a sister is partial."

"Is she going into the bank?"

"I do not know."

A slight shade came over Joan's face. Sibylla was a cause to her of much anxiety. How would her sister endure such a change in her circumstances, when that change was brought home to her in a way words could not effect? Sibylla knew that she and Joan were poor, knew that they could no longer live in luxury, but she had not realised in the smallest degree what poverty meant, nor nerved herself to endure hardship. How would she comport herself towards these new and strange associates whom she would probably despise?

"But she is coming here, I suppose?" said the girl Pointon.

"Yes, we have no home other than this. She must live with me."

"She might be worse off. I think this vastly fine," said Bessie; "and it's so clean."

"Why is she not here now?" inquired another.

"Because I am earning nothing yet, and she is staying in the house of friends who have kindly taken her in till I should be suited with a house and had got into work."

"When she comes here, she will work also?"

"I hope so."

"But she must. You ain't going to keep her in idleness, and work for both. You can't do it. You'll not earn enough as an apprentice."

"My word!" exclaimed Bessie, "if your sister thinks to live here and not work, I'll shake her."

"But," explained Joan, "I may require her at home to look after the house."

"Oh, the house with only two in it don't want so much looking after. Can she paint?"

"No."

"Then," said Maggie Pointon, "let her do the handling."

"No," exclaimed another. "She shall go into the transfer business."

. . . .

"Polly," Joan asked of her friend one day, "are all the girls as nice as those you have brought here?"

"Well, now," replied the cripple, "I can't say that honestly. There are girls and girls. Some are wild, and some few are downright bad. The wild ones mostly mean no harm, but they're flighty and don't look where they're going, and before they are aware, down they are in the mud on their noses. And some have bad fathers and mothers and no peace at home, but quarrelling and drinking — and they go out because they can't bide there. There's a lot of excuse for them if they do go a bit off the line. And there's some know they've a short life, and will get poisoned and be good for naught in a few years, and so they try to get the most of pleasure out of the little time they have to enjoy themselves—and they ain't as partic'lar as they might be where they go, and with whom they go pleasure-hunting. But there's an excuse for them, poor things — and at bottom they don't mean harm."

"By the way, Polly, I think you maligned your father. You told me that he was uproarious at times, when he had taken a drop in excess. And you feared it would inconvenience me, as there is a partition of one brick thick alone between us."

Polly laughed.

"I'll tell you the truth about it," said she. "Father is afeared of you, and he's been moderate sober on Saturdays since you came. But he did break out t'other night, and then, mother and me, we put him into my room and turned the key in the door, and we two went into that room nigh yours, so that you mightn't be disturbed."

Joan was touched, and she said as much.

"Oh, it's right enough," remarked Polly. "It answered first-rate. The wonder is we never thought to do it before. You see when mother is not in the same room with him, there's no aggravation, and he just goes to sleep. We'll try it again, if I can persuade mother to let him alone."

One evening, when Joan's little parlour had filled as usual, "What was your father's trade?" asked Bessie Callear.

"He was"— Joan hesitated. "A bit of a farmer."

"Ah!" said Maggie Pointon. "It's bad times for farmers, I've heard tell. I've got an aunt as married a farmer, and he's been in and seen us, and told how all the corn and beef and pork come from America, and the mutton from New Zealand and Australia, and the eggs from France, and the butter from Denmark; and he said as how they could get on when wool was sixpence a pound, but now the general public will have fine merino and won't touch English wool that has fallen to fourpence ha'penny—and what be the farmers to do but go bankrupt?"

"But nothing can beat Cheshire cheese," said one.

"Cheshire ain't all England. It isn't even Staffordshire," said another; then turning to Joan, added, "No wonder your father died badly off."

"I suppose he couldn't leave much?" asked a third.

"Very little indeed," answered Joan. "My sister has never been accustomed to work; that is why I think she will feel it. I would spare her as much as possible."

"You can't cook but what you've got in the larder," said Bessie. "How did you manage all this fine furnishing if your father died bankrupt?"

"I did not say he did that," said Joan. "We have had to sell our little possessions—the horses, and so on."

"Ay," said Margaret Pointon, "the waggons and the plough and those things, and the cattle—but if he were bankrupt, the creditors would take all that."

"There was sufficient left for my sister and me to start us," explained Joan, with a smile.

"I suppose you made the butter?" said Bessie.

"I wouldn't give 'thank you' for salt Irish butter," observed one girl. "Give me what is home-made."

"I'd rather have margarine than salt butter," said another.

"And I—dripping," said a third.

"Give me cheese and bacon; that is a satisfying thing to work on."

'Ay, but you may get stalled on that diet. I say, real yellow country butter, yellow that tells the cows feed on buttercups. That butter is the primest thing on earth."

"I'll tell you what I like," said another girl, thrusting her way to the fire. "Let me have a toasting-fork and brown a bit of bread on both sides, and while it is hot, clap on a lot of butter and let it melt in."

"Buttered toast is good," said Margaret Pointon.

"But it don't do credit to butter. You must eat butter cold. Once melted, then the nature is gone from it for ever."

"Then you must have plenty of it," threw in Polly. "I was out in the country once and went into a farm-house and asked for tea. The tea I had right enough, and then some fresh bread, and, my word! the woman set butter on it thick as my little finger. It was—it was—oh my!"

"I don't hold," said another girl, "that butter is spoiled when melted. Just think of a mealy potato, and a dab of butter in that. It's not to be beaten by nothing in kings' parlours."

"Ah, butter is sixteenpence a pound," said Cissie, with a sigh, "and half a pound don't go far in a large family. And you can't afford much butter when you are paid a penny or twopence a dozen enamelling prints, and they count eighteen to the dozen."

"It's fine our talking of butter," said Polly; "I'd like to know if that is country butter we get in the shops? It's no more like what that farmer's wife clapped on my slice of bread that chalk is to cheese."

A general grunt of assent, and then ensued a lull. The topic of butter was talked out.

Presently Cissie Averill said to Joan: "What a pretty hand you have got."

Joan extended her hand on the table, and displayed the delicate taper fingers.

"Girls," she said, "I don't call this a pretty hand at all. It has been a useless hand, whereas your hands have earned your daily bread. Such are the truly lovely hands." She looked at her next-door neighbour and friend, and added, "Above all, that of my dear Polly, crippled with cruel poisonous work. That is the hand to love and respect—not the idle hand that has never done aught."

"My word, girls!" exclaimed Bessie, "ain't she now giving us butter?"

"Whatever I am giving you," said Joan, "it is genuine."

CHAPTER XIII

COMMON AND UNCLEAN

SIBYLLA arrived at the country station, driving the rectorial cob in the low, basket-work, rectorial carriage.

She was just late for the train, which steamed away three minutes before she reached the station. When she drew up, Joan was already outside with her bag awaiting her.

"Well, dear!" exclaimed Sibylla, "I am sorry to be unpunctual, but Bobby has not been clipped, and he would only crawl. He is pachydermatous, and feels nothing. How are you?"

The sisters kissed, and Joan jumped in beside Sibyll.

"I'm main glad to see you," said the younger. "I have been living on tenterhooks, and you have kept me there. But, before I scold you, tell me, have you any more luggage?"

"None; everything I shall want is here."

"You are a queer piece of goods," said the younger, as she brought the lash across Bobby, who, however, took no notice whatever of it. His coat was like felt.

"I can't think why the cob has not been clipped. Fancy, Joan, a month without a word from you."

"I could not have any satisfaction in writing till I was settled."

"And are you settled now?"

"Yes, Sibyll, I have found work."

"Work! Bah! I hope it is such as a lady can do."

"Of course, dear. Am I one to take other?"

"Perhaps not; but you have such queer notions. Where have you been? There was no address, only the date at the head of your letter appointing to arrive to-day, and we tried to puzzle out the postmark and failed egregiously, it was so badly impressed."

"Whom do you mean by we?"

"The rector, Mrs. Barker, Jack Prendergast, and myself. We were quite three-quarters of an hour over it. We managed the last syllable but not the first. Mr. Barker got the Post Office Guide, and we tried to find out by that, but were unsuccessful."

"Well, my dear, have you been happy at the parsonage?" asked Joan.

"Yes, they have been very kind to me. But I must not stay there much longer. I know that the married daughter of the Barkers, whose husband is in India, is coming with her children before Christmas, and they will require my room."

"Anyhow, you would have to leave. It would be unseemly to impose on them for longer. It has been extremely kind of the rector and Mrs. Barker to take you in—but there must be no trespass on hospitality."

"Oh, as to that, Mr. Barker was presented to the living by papa. Besides, the Barkers had plenty of game and fruit sent them. They could have done no less."

"That may be the case; but your place will be with me."

"But where, Joan?"

"I have gone to one of the North Staffordshire pottery towns. Do you remember, Sibyll, how I at one time painted china for bazaars, and we bought in a few pieces ourselves?"

"Yes, they were extremely pretty—only there were some blisters. You kept the pieces that had pelargoniums on them, I remember."

"It was so. I have obtained work in a pottery—potbank is the local term."

"What!—can a lady?"—

"Perfectly."

"But you will have to associate with very inferior persons, I suppose. And common people are so apt to presume. Can you keep them at a distance?"

"I can make my own friends, of course, and limit my acquaintance to them."

"But what sort of people are they in that place? Are they nice?"

"They are better than nice—they are lovable."

"Nonsense, Joan. Is there good society that we can mix in?"

"We shall have no chance of associating in what you call good society. Remember, we are poor."

"We are not by any means so badly off as you represent. Mr. Beaudessart has been to old Shand and will buy everything in Pendabury at any reasonable sum that the lawyer fixes. Shand has named a figure—really outside the value, a good round sum, and Mr. Beaudessart closed at once, to his surprise. And he gave him a cheque for the amount. I believe he is awfully done—isn't it glorious?"

"Whatever the sum may be," said Joan, "it is not likely to be such as to enable us to live on the interest in idleness. I know what there was in the house—pictures and plate were excluded—and if Mr. Shand has taken advantage of Mr. Beaudessart's generosity, it is entirely against my wish, and, if possible, I will refund the excess. I will not be beholden to any man for charity, and I will not profit by over-reaching. Anyhow, whatever sum has been raised, I propose to let it stand, and, Sibyll, it shall be yours when you marry. As for myself, I will not say that I have made my bed in which to lie, but I have found a field in which all my faculties of mind and body will find exercise, and that will provide me with a new zest in life."

"Do you mean as a painter on porcelain?"

"Yes."

"What will you receive? A large sum?"

"No. At first outset barely sufficient to sustain us. As I get on, I trust that the pay will increase."

"It is monstrous," said the younger sister, standing up in the carriage to whack the cob. "It is simply monstrous that you, who have never done a stroke of real work in your life, should have now to work for your bread."

"On the contrary, Sibyll, I regard it as monstrous that till now I have never done a stroke of profitable work."

"See!" exclaimed Sibyll, "here comes Mr. Beaudessart driving this way. We shall meet, and I do believe he only wants a sign to lead him to speak to us."

"Drive on," said Joan. "If he has been cheated about the furniture I am ashamed to look him in the face."

Hector Beaudessart passed and raised his hat. Joan bowed somewhat stiffly, and without a muscle in her face changing. Sibyll made a sign of gay recognition with the driving whip.

"He is inclined to be civil, and I have had a hint from Mr. Barker that he is willing to do something for us, if we will allow it."

"But I will not allow it," said Joan peremptorily. "I will not live upon alms. Besides, I have learned to be ashamed of idleness. God forgive me for my last twenty-three years!" she exclaimed passionately.

"No, Sibyll, there is something elevating, ennobling in honest work."

"I see no fun in work; unless we are absolutely and inevitably driven to it, I would not work at all."

"That is precisely the sentiment of the Hooligan, the Sundowner, and the tramp."

"Nonsense. We are ladies."

Joan made no reply. Her bosom was heaving with a sort of anger. But this passed. Then she began to ask herself whether it would be possible for her to inspire Sibylla with any of those new ideas that were fermenting in her own brain and firing her blood. The Mosaic law forbade the harnessing together of the ox and the ass in the plough, and was it possible that she, who was prepared to undertake patient plodding, and the light and impetuous Sibyll could go under one yoke?

"You have not told me yet," said the young sister pettishly, "what sort of place you have decided upon for us to live in. Are there golf links, and is there a hockey club?"

"We are in profound mourning," said Joan evasively.

"But we shall not be so eternally. So soon as we are in half mourning we can go out—and hockey does not count. Why are you dressed with such outrageous plainness?"

"Because I cannot afford to dress richly."

"We must dress up to our rank."

"And our rank is now other from what it was. We shall have to consider this."

"I shall always be a lady," said Sibyll, tossing her chin and flicking the reins.

"I have no intention of being other," answered Joan quietly, "but a poor lady I shall be by constraint, and one working for my sustenance. Do not forget that, Sibyll."

"I loath the notion."

"I love it."

"All men are not made alike, it is said; and I am quite certain that all girls are not. What sort of cottage have you taken?"

"It is a small house in a street—but an end house."

"In a street! insufferable! I trust it is semi-detached in the villa style."

"Not at all. A plain brick house, one in a row; with one window and a door in front on the ground floor, and two above. That is all."

"But—there is a garden?"

"None at all. Flowers and shrubs, even grass, will not grow there."

"Gracious, Joan! This is sickening. Why, we shall never get people to call on us in such a hole as that."

"I have had abundance of callers," said Joan, with a smile—but there was a tinge of sadness in the smile.

"Callers! How so? Had you introductions?"

"To be candid with you, Sibyll, all the callers I have had, and all that we are likely to have, and dare expect, will be people of the working class—the class to which, henceforth, we belong."

"Joan!"—Sibyll dropped the reins, and turned herself bodily about. "Surely, and in grave earnestness, you do not mean common people?"

"Yes, common people. We are now only common people ourselves."

"I hate everything common."

"The common earth, and common air—and, I suppose, even common prayer?"

"You know what I mean. I cannot, I will not sink to associate with common people."

"Sibyll, you remind me of the apostle. When the sheet was let down out of heaven full of all manner of beasts, he would not touch them, because they were common and unclean. He was rebuked. 'What God hath cleansed that call not thou common.' Sibyll, we are all common people, children of first common parents, of the same common flesh and blood, and partakers of a common Redemption."

"Bah!"

Sibyll's brows knit, and her lips tightened.

"If you talk like this, Joan, I shall get to hate you."

"Sister dear, do not make matters harder for me. I have to think for the future of both of us. I have to face our present difficulties."

"Well, Joan, I do not wish to hurt your feelings, and prove obstinate. But I do ask one thing of you, and that I entreat you to grant. Say nothing to anyone in or about Pendabury about this terrible come-down. Fancy the servants, the village people, our friends, the county families, knowing that we had descended to such a depth of degradation! It would be too horrible for words."

"I will say nothing, and spare your feelings; and do you, Sibyll, in return, as you love me, never again speak of common people. What God hath cleansed that call not thou common."

CHAPTER XIV

AN OBSTINATE WOMAN

JOAN FROBISHER was warmly received at the parsonage by the rector and his wife, for with them she had ever been a prime favourite. Sibyll they endured and made allowances for ; but Joan they loved.

She was in time for their early dinner, which had been postponed for half an hour on that day, so as to enable her to dine with them.

" You have left us in the dark ; you disappeared into space without informing us whither you were going," said Mrs. Barker. " Now tell us everything about your doings and where you have been, for you know how deeply and warmly we are interested in you. We spent an infinity of trouble and much time over the postmark this morning, when your letter reached us. The rector got out his magnifying glass — he looked, I looked, so did Mr. Prendergast and Sibyll, but failed to make out anything."

" Joan," said the younger of the sisters, striking in before the other could answer, " Joan has been engaged scouring the country in quest of a house, and has at length discovered one near the moors, that she thinks will suit us."

"Where? Which moors? What is the name of the parish?" asked the rector.

"That is, unfortunately, what I am obliged to leave you in ignorance about," said Joan.

"You see," put in Sibyll, "till we are established in our new quarters, and till I know that the air and the neighbourhood will agree with me, we do not wish to be regarded as permanently settled."

"And," added Joan, "we desire to be very, very quiet this winter."

"That could not well happen," said Sibyll, "if it were known where we were. Our many friends about Pendabury are certain to have relations and acquaintances in that part, and would impress on them the obligation to call on us. So Joan and I have put our heads together, and have agreed to keep dark as to where we shall perch, till we have quite made up our minds to nest there."

"Well, you know best," said Mrs. Barker. "But consider that everyone will be inquiring about you, and that of us; and it seems strange, and it will be embarrassing to have to reply to querists that we do not know where you are. Ask people will, for you are general favourites, and much sympathy has been felt for you."

"Dear Mrs. Barker," said Joan, "none can appreciate this sympathy more than do my sister and myself. We have undergone a great shock—the sudden death of our father—and before we had recovered from that, there came a second—the loss of all that he had laid by for our maintenance in comfort. We have been called upon to quit our old home, to break old ties, relax old associations, and we need quiet in which to fit ourselves to our altered circumstances, and form our habits to the new mode of life to which Providence calls us. Put yourself in our place. When you have received a stunning blow, is it not the best of all medicines to be left absolutely undisturbed?"

"I daresay that you are right," said the rector, "but you will be beset by inquirers so long as you are here. Every old tenant on the estate, every poor cottager in the parish, will ask, 'Well, miss, and where to be you going?' You will find it a hard matter to put them off."

"But, Mr. Barker, I do not propose to remain here and trespass on your hospitality more than three nights—allowing myself just sufficient time to run round and say good-bye to our village friends. I shall manage somehow to put them off as to our destination. Their acquaintance with geography is not so extensive but that it will enable me to puzzle them."

Both the rector and his wife exclaimed against so early a departure, but Joan persisted in her determination.

"I have taken a cottage and furnished it," she said, "and have left it vacant."

"But have you not engaged a servant?" asked Sibylla, somewhat taken aback.

"If I had I could not have left her alone. But I have not; and so, as my house is empty and all my new things are unprotected, I must return as soon as I possibly can."

"Now, look here," said the rector, "we give you till March as a close season; after that we shall insist on knowing where you are, and as you hinted the moors, I have no doubt there are trout-streams near you. I will then insist on looking you up, and provide you with a dish of silver trout. Bless me! The moors! What a place for bee-keeping. You must let me rig you up a row of patent hives."

After the early dinner, leaving her sister to pack up her clothes and small treasures, Joan started for the home farm, to see Mrs. Truslove, and to order from her twelve pounds of butter, to be packed, each pound separately, but all together in one hamper.

The shortest, cleanest, and most pleasant way to the farm was through the park, but Joan purposely did not select this. She preferred to take the more circuitous high road, that for a portion of the way skirted the grounds of Pendabury. The chosen road was not a little dirty, and where not dirty was stony, as the road makers had been spreading tracts of broken metalling, at that time of the year most suitable for being worked into the bed of the highway.

Mrs. Truslove, of the farm, was very pleased to see Joan, and detained her some time talking over old times, and expressing her desire to know where the young ladies intended to settle, as also, that they should remember and have their butter from her.

She was a warm-hearted woman, but behind all feeling for those who were leaving lurked anxiety lest the new squire should not consume as much butter and milk and cream as had the old household. Folk did say he had a house near Lichfield, and that he would spend most of his time there; and if Pendabury were to be shut up, it would be a bad thing for the tenant of the home farm. Finally, Joan got away, and Mrs. Truslove undertook to send to the rectory the butter that was ordered, the evening before Joan's departure.

Barely had Joan left the farm before she encountered Hector Beaudessart issuing from the gates of the park, apparently on his way to the farm she had just quitted.

At once he saluted, and that with warmth.

Seeing that she was about to turn down the road, he threw open the gate to Pendabury grounds and said—

"No, indeed, Miss Frobisher, you are not to be allowed to wade in red mud, or turn your ankles on the stones. I know that you intend returning to the rectory, and, with your permission, I will accompany you part of the way thither, over the dry and gravelled path through the grounds. I passed you this morning, and have been wishing and purposing to speak with you a few words. Are you at leisure to listen to them now?"

"You are very kind," said Joan, "and, as you see, I am disengaged."

She could not without ungraciousness refuse the civility. If he were intent on making to her some communication, it would be as well to have it over at once, and not remain in suspense herself, and force him to call at the parsonage. She accordingly passed through the gateway with a slight bow. He stood aside and then followed, and came up with her.

They walked side by side for some little way in silence, he apparently labouring with diffidence, and she wondering what he was about to say. Presently she broke silence with a question.

"Is your mother with you at the Hall?"

"Not yet," he replied; "she is still at Rosewood, and my sister Julie is now leaving. When she is gone, then I suppose my mother will come here. I ride over about every alternate day to see after matters that require to be attended to. I suspect my mother will remove from Rosewood next Saturday, and this brings me to the matter upon which I desire to consult you. We have taken Rosewood for a term of seven years at least, and it hangs upon our hands. It is really a sweet spot, commands a lovely view, stands high, and faces the sun. My dear mother has had the garden well stocked, and the house is fully furnished. Indeed, in it are new plate, china, and linen, everything requisite—and we require none of these things, as there is abundance of all that can be wanted at Pendabury. My mother and Julie have been talking the matter over, and to be plain with you, we are embarrassed what to do with Rosewood. I am commissioned to approach you with a petition, and to supplicate that you and your sister will do us the favour of occupying it. I know that we deserve nothing at your hands — but we have heard enough of you to know that you are charitable. In our dilemma we appeal to that quality for which you are famous in these parts, to extricate us from our difficulties. We do not wish to let the house; at this time of the year it would not be easy to find a tenant, and we do not relish leaving all our new and pretty furniture to be mildewed and moth-eaten. Will you go to Rosewood? There is more," he added hastily, as he saw she was about to speak, and from the look of her face judged that she was about to decline his offer. "There are at Rosewood a cob and a light carriage, harness—everything, in fact, is new, and harness is an article that rapidly deteriorates unless kept in constant use. We shall be forced to retain a man at Rosewood to look to the garden and the cob, whether the latter be employed or not. These also are entirely at your service; and Rosewood is only nine miles from Pendabury, so that your friends will be round you."

"I thank you," said Joan, with a flutter in her voice, for she felt the sincere kindness that prompted the offer, and saw through the excuses that were made to disguise its kindness. "Pray tell your dear mother that I feel her thought for us, and feel it deeply; but I have already rented and furnished a house, suitable for my sister and myself, and made all arrangements for going into it in a couple of days."

"Is it far from this place?"

"Some way."

"In that case you will feel lonely away from your old friends and neighbours."

"That happens to be precisely what my sister and I desire. We do not mean this to be taken as though we were ungrateful for many kindnesses shown us, and as if we had become acrimonious spinsters, snarling at the world, and misinterpreting every courtesy shown us. Far from that—our purpose is to be quiet, and keep to ourselves for a while. We have undergone a sharp trial, and wish to retire till our wounds are healed, away from scenes that remind us of a happy past and keep alive the sense of pain."

"Must it be so indeed?" said the young man, turning his troubled face toward her. "May I return to the charge, and put the matter in another light? On entering and occupying Pendabury we shall labour under a cloud of prejudice. The whole neighbourhood will resent our intrusion and your displacement. You they have loved and admired, and have regarded as the choicest ornament of their district. Pendabury without you or your sister will be placed under taboo. You see, we are selfish people, considering in all this our own convenience. Is it really so—that you are inflexible in your determination? Will not you come—one at a time, or, better still, both—and stay with my mother at Pendabury? You shall have your old rooms just as you left them, and your old lady's maid to attend on you; and, with you there, the world of South Staffordshire will witness that we are on good terms, and for your sakes will have mercy upon us strangers and Colonials."

"You put your request in such a way as to make it very difficult for me to refuse. But as I said, we have taken our house. Both cannot abandon it—we should be in the same plight with regard to it as you profess to be about Rosewood; and I am sure you would not like to have one sister eat her heart out in solitude if you carried off the other. I thank your mother, and fully appreciate her goodness, but I cannot accept."

"Well, then," said Hector, with an exclamation of impatience, "if you will not help us, will you graciously allow us to help you?"

"In what way?"

"You are going to a new place, among strangers. You are starting without any man or woman of experience and suitable age to assist you. Is it not so? Difficulties you will meet with, and will not know how to surmount them, and you may become a prey to the designing and selfish. I do entreat you, let Julie accompany you, and place herself at your disposal, for a while. She knows much of the world, and would be invaluable."

"I have settled everything," answered Joan. "As to Julie—if I actually need her, I have only to write, 'Come over and help us,' and she will be with me. She put her hand into mine and promised to answer such an appeal."

"You will not suffer us to do more?"

"Thank you—nothing."

"Upon my word, Miss Frobisher, you are without exception the most obstinate woman I have met in my life. Julie is self-willed—but you are self-will sublimated to an essence."

"You would say that I am ungracious. That I may not be esteemed utterly obstinate in your sight, I will accept of one thing from you—a large hamper of holly with berries. Send it to the station I will designate, to be left till called for, in the week before Christmas. I will manage to have it fetched thence."

"Is that really all?"

"All."

CHAPTER XV

THE BLUE LINE

WHEN the two girls arrived at the station of the pottery town in which Joan had resolved settling, a cab, by previous arrangement, was awaiting them.

It was needed on account of the luggage they had brought with them. This was in excess of what Joan thought necessary, but Sibylla had insisted on carrying away from Pendabury, and bringing to the new quarters, a thousand knick-knacks, little china dogs and cocks and cows, framed photographs, pin-trays, novels and flower-vases, without which, in her opinion, no girl's bedroom could be complete.

The moment that they alighted, the urchin, uninvited, appeared on the scene and snatched at the bag and bundles Joan had in her hands, and then, observing that Sibylla was her companion, wrested from her also umbrella and parasol, and whatever was in her arms.

"So ye're back!" said the boy, winking at Joan. "I was about to advertise—lost, stolen, or strayed, a young maid."

"Stand back!" exclaimed Sibylla indignantly, staring at the audacious arab. "Let go my parcels. Joan! do pray drive that insolent boy away."

"Is this yer sister?" inquired he, looking up into Joan's face with a familiar grin.

"She is."

"They needn't trouble to pass the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill for my convenience," said he. "When I'm a sorrerin' widower I shan't cast my affections her way."

"You go too far," said Joan. "What is your name?"

"Tom Treddlehoyle. Do yer like the sound of it?"

"Tom," said Joan, "you offend my sister, and I do not like too much of this."

"All right," answered the urchin, "you can have too much toffee at times."

"Here," said Joan, "here are three pence; I cannot add another, as you have not deserved it with a compliment."

Joan and her sister entered the cab. The boy touched his tattered cap with mock politeness, slammed the door with unnecessary violence, turned the handle, and then, with a leap, ensconced himself by the driver.

"Good gracious! that little fiend is on the box," exclaimed Sibyll. "Joan, we cannot possibly let him accompany us. He is in rags and is smirched with dirt, face and hands, and tatters. It will never do for us to drive through the town with that horror. What will people think of us?"

"As to that, Sibyll, no one will give us a thought. That jackanapes will be serviceable with our boxes and bundles when we reach our destination. He is not a bad little chap."

"Impertinence should never be encouraged," said Sibyll, in a tone of disgust. "It makes me quite uncomfortable to know that he fingers our traps, he is so dirty."

"He is miserably poor—and I am glad to be able to give him a few coppers," said Joan. "We have struck up a sort of friendship, he and I."

"Preserve us!"

"And he really does amuse me."

"I can see nothing amusing in insolence," observed Sibylla severely.

The matter was allowed to drop, and the younger sister looked out of the cab window on her side.

"What a hideous town this is, and so sooty," she remarked irritably. "I have not seen a decent shop as yet. Is it always muffled in crape?"

"We have hardly reached the best part of the town," explained Joan.

"And there are no well-dressed people. We have not passed a single private carriage."

"No one here keeps private carriages. The only wheeled conveyances are the doctor's gig, the tram-cars, some wains, and many perambulators. Do not expect too much. Sibyll, let me speak plainly, and dispel any illusions still occupying your brain. We are wretchedly poor. Papa had much overdrawn at the bank, to invest in that Transvaal gold mine, and we are left with very little. I intend that we shall live by the work of our own hands, and not as parasites. We have been compelled by circumstances to descend from our position as county people to that of the operatives. We shall have to live among and associate with the working hands in a pottery. That is the truth, and has to be met. We must face our difficulties without flinching, and gird ourselves to our task. As a sensible girl you will accommodate yourself to the inevitable; as a good Christian girl you will not give way to useless repining. There are compensations in life, and I already see that the compensation in our case will be considerable. For my part, I feel as though I had stepped out of a conservatory to take a plunge in the sea. You will, doubtless, be startled at first when you meet your future associates, who are my friends. They will come in this evening, after work hours, to observe you. Show them a smiling face and give them pleasant words. They may not have highly polished manners, and so differ from the girls with whom you have hitherto associated, but at heart there is no difference, or let me rather say, what difference exists, is all in their favour. They do not live in luxury, they are none of them idlers; they are, every one of them, useful members of society, contributors to the well-being of mankind. Every one of them has something solid to show at the end of each day: one has turned out so many dozen teapot spouts, another has coloured so many score sprigs of flowers, a third has made so many electric insulators. What contribution have you or I given to human comfort or progress? Our days have been spent in vanity, emptiness, self-indulgence, and waste of good time. Each one of these poor girls in a single day has rendered up a nobler tale of work than you or I in ten years. I beg you to consider that, when you meet them. Approach them in a humble spirit, and humility is the only attitude that beseems us well-bred loafers. They have warm hearts. You will discover that there is a quality in them which will command something more than respect. They are useful—we, not. To such as ourselves, shouldered from our seat by the fire, and thrust forth into a cold and stormy world, the welcome of warm hearts should be precious."

"I will do what I can," said Sibyll, "but I am not a canary, to change my colour when I change my climate."

Joan took her sister's hand.

"Sibyll, I entreat you not to offend them."

"I will do what I can. I have said so, and I will be as good as my word. But you must not expect of me impossibilities."

"Impossibilities! No—all I require of you is to behave towards these girls with kindly courtesy. That is what every lady should be able and willing to give to even the lowest."

Sibyll interrupted her sister with an exclamation—

"I say, Joan! Where are we going? We seem to be descending into the slums. What an awful place!"

"This is our street."

The cab stopped, and with one bound the urchin was on the ground; and next moment had reached the door of No. 16, and had knocked.

It was opened immediately, and a girl appeared in the doorway with the glow behind her in the little passage from the fire in the parlour.

The boy ran to the side of the cab, and threw wide the door, then unceremoniously laid hold of rugs and parcels that lay on the unoccupied seat, and carried them within. He was back in a moment, but not before Joan had descended. He then crooked his arm with offer of support to Sibyll as she stepped forth.

"One of us must watch the imp," said Sibyll, "lest he walk off with some of our traps. We have so many small items."

"He is all right; I would trust him with my watch," said Joan. "Come in and see my pal, Polly."

When the boy had carried every article into the house, and Joan had paid the cabman, she offered the lad threepence for his further services.

"All right," said he, "but I'd prefer a kiss."

"And that you certainly shall not have from me."

"Well, give me leave to cheek your sister."

"Nor that either."

"Then hand over the threepence."

"Tom," said Joan, "we are not far off Christmas. I shall be making a plum-pudding against that festival. Should you be this way, and come to our door on Christmas Day, I think there will be a slice for you, with a sprig of holly on top. In return, moderate your impudence. My sister does not like it. She is unhappy, and a very little upsets her. Say what you will to me—I don't mind you—but keep a civil tongue in your head before her."

"All right, old gal!" sung out the urchin, turned a wheel in the muddy street, and disappeared.

With a beaming face Joan entered the parlour, that was flushed with light from a well heaped-up coal fire.

Sibyll had been prepared by Joan for Polly. Joan had told her that the girl was partly paralysed; that she lived next door; that she had been a help to her in many ways, notably in getting admission to

Fennings' bank; and she had further enlarged on the girl's many good qualities.

Polly flew to divest Sibyll of her sealskin jacket.

"My word!" she exclaimed, "if this ain't real fur. What a grand burying you might have on it! However did you come by it?"

"It was given to me by my father," answered Sibyll.

"He must have been reckless with his brass. No wonder he went bankrupt. I've got you something ready to eat. The kettle is on the boil for tea, and I've set out bacon and cheese for your meal."

"Bacon and cheese!" gasped Sibyll.

"I think, Polly," said Joan, "that we shall have an appetite for nothing but tea and bread and butter. We have plenty to occupy us; a lot of unpacking must be done, and that before the girls drop in. That they are sure to do when they go by from bank, and notice a light in our house."

"Ah, you know them," said Polly, laughing. "Well, it's just about so. They're all amazing curious to see your sister, and find out if she is like you."

"I am glad to hear it, for I have something for each."

"No—now—what?"

"I will give you your present at once, if you will get me a knife and help to cut the strings of that hamper. Take care — we must not open it in this hot room, but remove it to the back kitchen."

"What is it?"

"Butter. A pound of real country butter for each of my friends."

Polly would have clapped her hands had not one been maimed. However, her eyes danced.

"You couldn't give us nothing we'd like better. There's some for Cissie, I suppose?"

"Of course there is."

"I doubt if she will come here."

"Why so?"

"She's in trouble."

"Of what sort?"

"Oh, the blue line."

"What do you mean by the blue line?"

"Look here," said Polly, and pulled down her lower lip. "Do you see this streak? That is the lead. It shows itself there, when in the blood. At the bank the bailie found out that Cissie had it, and she has been sacked. They don't want to have her paralysed or die of the lead colic. You see there's been a lot of talk lately about the lead, and there's Government Inspectors coming down to look into it—so they tell; and Charlie Mangin don't want a row, and anything get in the papers about poisoning at Fennings' bank. So he sacked her at once."

"But why was she not put to other work in which no lead was employed?"

"She's too far gone for that. They do that often, but you see there's an inspector like to come."

"Then is she at home now?"

"She is at No. 35."

"Is that where her people are?"

"She hasn't got any people. She has no home. Her father met with an accident in the ovens and was killed. She is an orphan—without a mother either. She just lodges with the Skrimagers. How she will get on now with them, and she earning no wages, I can't say. But she is gone terrible low-spirited."

"This is extraordinarily sudden, is it not?"

"Oh no! She's knowed it was coming on, but said naught. You see she must live, and to live must work; and so long as the public will have their ware glossed, some must do the dipping. She had the lead over her fingers all day, and run up her sleeve, over her arm. Some take it sooner; for years some don't seem to be affected by it, and then, all at once, down they go as if shot. Cissie has been ailing for some time, and looked queer, and has been low and not liked to talk. We saw it was coming on, but she took care to keep her mouth shut, so that the blue line might not be seen. But it was found out at last, and now she is done for."

"But what will become of her if the Skrimagers will not keep her?"

"She'll get worse, and have to be took to the hospital or union."

"I'll go to her at once," said Joan.

"Ay, go, there is a dear. The Skrimagers are out now at bank. I'll keep your sister company."

CHAPTER XVI

SUPPRESSED RHEUMATISM

JOAN found Cissie Averill alone in No. 35, crouching by the fire, with her head in her hands and with traces of tears on her colourless cheeks. She looked up as her visitor entered, and greeted her with a smile, but a smile in which was no brightness.

"Tell me all about it," said Joan, taking a stool and seating herself beside Cissie.

Then the girl poured out her story into her ear. There was not much in it more than what had already been communicated by Polly Myatt, but the particulars were fuller.

"I've been ailing some time," said Cissie, "and I knowed it would be on me soon. Charlie Mangin heard of it through our bailie, and he came right into our room and straight up to me. 'Look here,' says he, 'I'm not going to have no more lead cases at Fennings', so clear out with a week's wages to play with. Hook to the seaside—anywhere you like out of this town; and after you have been there three weeks, I'll send you a postal order for a sovereign. If you mend, the Fennings know how to make it up to you—and you'll be taken back again, and promoted to something better.' 'Well,' said I, 'I'll consider it.' Then he pressed me further, and I asked him to give me a couple of days to consider it. You see, a sovereign won't go a long way, what with the trainage and lodgings; and I don't feel up to nothing, and don't fancy the sea would do much for me. If I am to die, let me die here where I've worked all my days, and where I've some friends. I don't want to be hustled away to die amongst strangers, just to accommodate Fennings and oblige Mangin."

"Why should you not go into the hospital here?"

"Because it would be reported as another case of lead-poisoning, and be brought home to Fennings' bank. They don't want to be blamed and get a bad name. It might get into the papers, and then the public might take it into their heads not to buy Fennings' ware, and think they'd done the virtuous thing, and go to sleep again. That is why they're ready enough to give me a sovereign to keep out of the way."

"Do you really expect to be ill, Cissie?"

"I don't see how I can chance to be other. I've enjoyed bad health some time, but I've kept it back and tried not to let anyone see the blue line. I've held my mouth closed—but it has come out at last.

I suppose I shall just melt away with it. The lead plays the deuce with the nervous system, as they call it, and puts all the organs out of tune."

"But really, I suspect that the seaside would be the best place for you."

Cissie shook her head.

"I haven't saved enough to keep me playing. When Mangin's sovereign and my money are spent—what then? I'd rather die here. I know you'd come and see me."

"But, Cissie, you must not die. You must not think of melting away, as you term it. Surely you can take up some healthier branch of the work."

"Where? No potbank will have me, now that the Government are making such a stir about us, and sending down a Commissioner to examine into the matter of the lead-poisoning."

"But—needlework?"

"Look at my thumb—how that is affected. Besides, I have never learned needlework and cutting-out, and suchlike. I was put to the pots when a child, and have kept to them ever since. Then—when one is leaded, most of the life and pluck go out of one. There's no strength left, and all you care for is just to be let alone. At first you fear it is coming on, and you struggle against it. Then you know it is on you, and it's no good resisting. At last you have it, and don't care what happens. That's my case. I don't wish to hurt the bank; I've worked in it sixteen years, and the rest of the girls have been at me persuading me to leave the place, so that there mayn't be no disturbances. Some must do the work, and if they do it, sooner or later they must be leaded."

"Cissie," said Joan, "the same mischief is not wrought in all parts of the factory."

"Bless you, no. It is harmless anywhere but in the dipping and the ground-laying. But what's the good of all the processes that are harmless, without the lead at the end? Some must do the work with that."

"Why must?"

"Because nobody will have ware that hasn't been treated with it."

Joan looked into the fire and brooded. She could see no way out of the dilemma. Presently she said—

"Cissie, I am about to try to get my sister into Fennings' bank; not into one of the branches of the work that is dangerous. I am determined that she shall have nothing to do with the lead."

"You must go where you're put."

"We shall see. She shall leave, if set at any employment that will poison her. Now, when we are both engaged all day we shall require someone in No. 16, to look after the house for us and to cook our dinner for us."

"Shan't you go to an eating-house?"

"No—because I want you to come to us."

"Me!"

"Yes, Cissie. Come and help us. My sister has never been accustomed to work of any sort, and would be as helpless over the kitchen fire as you would be with a sewing machine. We shall return from the bank fagged and disinclined for domestic drudgery; moreover, how should I find time to receive the girls in the evening, if I had to be engaged on matters connected with the house? I should be most unwilling not to have leisure to sit and talk, and bake chestnuts with my visitors."

"Me, with you?"

"Yes, Cissie. Have you any objection?"

The tears filled the girl's great solemn eyes, and she took Joan's hand between her own and kissed it; then she dropped the hand and said—

"It won't do neither. I'm pretty sure to be palsied. My hand may fall at the wrist like Polly Myatt's, or else I'd have the lead colic."

"I'll take you as you are, Cissie; and if you do fail, you shall not go to the hospital. I will attend to you myself. And now"—as the girl was about to be effusive in her gratitude—"now I particularly wish you to return with me at once to No. 16, for I have got a present for you from the country—a pound of beautiful butter, yellow as a buttercup, from Jersey cows, and with a crown of roses stamped on the top."

The girl's heart was too full for words, but she pressed Joan's hand to her bosom, and rose to accompany her.

At that moment the door opened and Mrs. Skrimager came in, the woman with whom Cissie lodged.

Recognising Joan, she nodded and said—

"Bad job about Cissie, ain't it?"

"Very bad indeed; she is too young to become a wreck," answered Joan.

"Oh, we've all to chance it," said the woman slightingly. "My Jane went with it. Some stand it better than do others. Whatever she's to do I don't know. We can't keep her here, earning nothing. That's not reasonable, and she's no relation to the master or to me, so we've no call to do it."

"What's that?" asked Skrimager, also coming in. "Are you talking about Cissie? If she leaves here it's to go to the hospital, and we don't want that. Lord, old woman! it shan't come to that. You know, mother, how our daughter Jane was leaded and we lost her. Well, the doctor, he behaved like a gem'man, and registered her, as how she died of suppressed rheumatics. What the deuce do it matter, if a gal does go underground, if it's caused by the lead or by suppressed rheumatics? It don't touch her 'appiness in kingdom come, now-ways. And it ain't more consoling to the surviving parents, if it's one or t'other. We don't want no unpleasantness any more than do the Fennings. If there's such a fuss made about the lead—and there's too many restrictions imposed—it'll drive the business out of the country, and that means as how the money will go to Germans or French, and not come into North Staffordshire. Colour dusting and dipping must be done, and you must have some to do it, and take the risks. I'll tell you what I'll do, mother and Cissie; I'll have a talk to Charlie Mangin, and propose—what will you do it for, mother? shall I say seven shillings a week?—that we keep the girl on here, and if she die, I daresay we can get a doctor as is a gem'man, who will subscribe she died of suppressed rheumatics. Lord bless you! it's wonderful what a ravaging complaint that is in our parts, and how many in this place do die of suppressed rheumatics."

CHAPTER XVII

FOOTINGS

ON reaching No. 16, Joan was at once aware that something had gone wrong. Several girls, on their way home from bank, had dropped in, and were standing in perplexity looking at Sibyll, who sat crying in a rocking-chair by the hearth, whilst the good-natured Bessie Callear was kneeling beside her, attempting vainly to tranquillise her.

Joan could read mortification and ill-temper in her sister's face, and she saw that the well-intentioned efforts of Bessie and such as seconded her but aggravated the evil. She accordingly at once proceeded to create a diversion.

"Girls," she said, "glad to see you all again, and I have got a trifle for every one of you—just to show that I had you in my mind whilst I was away. You can have buttered toast as much as you can manage, Bessie! And you, Polly, shall have your slice of bread with butter laid on with a trowel. And you, Essie Gott, can stick a big pat into a mealy potato. Look! there is a pound for each in the back kitchen, done up in white muslin. As to my sister, you must excuse her. She is tired out and unhappy. Remember that she has had a hard day, leaving her old home, so that the best place for her is bed, and the best medicine a good sleep."

The girls rushed into the back kitchen, where the butter was ranged; and Joan took occasion to go to her sister and whisper—

"Do not be put out; I will dismiss them in two minutes. They really mean well, and are come to welcome you."

"Is this a public-house or a parish club?" asked Sibyll peevishly. "I did hope that if we had ever so small a house, we should have it to ourselves. To be mobbed in this way is intolerable."

Joan could not answer, for the girls returned in exuberant delight, and insisted on kissing her. Nothing she could have given them would have caused greater pleasure.

"There's one over," said Polly; "you take my advice and send it down with your respects to Lena Battersby. She is to take you on as 'prentice in the painting-room; she'll receive it as an attention, and you'll be the gainer for that."

"I will certainly do so," said Joan.

"Then, mind you write on a slip, 'With Miss Frobisher's compliments and kind regards to Miss Battersby.' I'll take it to her. She don't live in our street."

This was cheerfully agreed to. Then the guests departed, full of smiles and thanks.

When the sisters were left to themselves, Sibyll assumed an air of injured innocence. She was the youngest, and must accordingly submit, but she was constrained to remark that she thought she might have been consulted, at least considered, when Joan selected a place of habitation, and companions. It was no obligation binding on a sister to be friends with the acquaintances of her sister; on the contrary, usually each selected her own associates. She must say that from what she had seen of Joan's mode of living, she regarded it as peculiar. Of course these friends of hers had brothers, and where these girls entered there their male relations would thrust themselves. Then a condition of affairs would be reached that would be worse than peculiar, one that the rector of their parish at home would reprobate, one that would make her dear father turn in his grave.

Joan bore this grumbling good-humouredly and without contradiction.

As the following day was Sunday, she endeavoured to get Sibyll to resolve whether she preferred going to church in the morning or in the evening, as one of the twain must be at home to prepare the early dinner. Joan had some difficulty in getting her sister to come to a decision. Finally, however, Sibyll said that very possibly she might attend divine worship in the morning, as she was convinced of her incapacity to execute the most ordinary kitchen work.

When Sunday morning came, Joan undertook the preparations for the meal, and Sibyll, who did not leave her room till late, described herself as being too tired, and too afraid of losing her way, and too much ashamed of her condition, to care to go to church at all.

On Monday morning Joan's work at the "bank" was to begin. She rose before daylight, made herself a cup of cocoa, laid the fire for Sibyll, put on the kettle, and started for the pottery works.

One of the girls there employed, Essie Gott, called for her, so as to introduce her. Mr. Mangin would not be at the office so early; moreover, it was quite unnecessary that she should report herself to him. The bailie, or foreman, had been told to expect her, and Lena Battersby awaited her.

The women working at ground-laying and the assistants to the dippers wear overalls, a loose white dress that completely covers the gown, sleeves included, and they wear flat caps of the same material and colour, in shape like those worn by French men-cooks. The dress is by no means unbecoming—and a workshop presents a fresh and pleasant aspect, with the white figures moving in it, themselves like animated pieces of Dresden ware.

The first thing to be done on entering the works is to deposit the tin containing the breakfast in its proper place, where, on a stove, it can be kept warm, and then those engaged on the dangerous branches of the work assume their overalls.

In the shops of nearly every description, men and women, youths and young girls work together, and in some departments a man is served by two lasses. In the transfer and colour-dusting rooms, and in the warehouse, women predominate, whereas only men are engaged in the stacking of an oven and in the firing.

A brief account of the processes in a pottery may be here given.

After the clay has been thoroughly prepared, it is given to the "thrower," who fashions upon the wheel plain spherical articles, assisted by a woman called a "baller," who works up the requisite quantity of clay, and passes it to him in lumps.

Irregularly shaped vessels are made in moulds by "pressers," as also articles with raised or incised ornament. Those who press plates are called "flat pressers," whereas the "hollow-ware pressers" are such as make tureens, vases, and the like.

The handles and spouts of cups and jugs and teapots are made separately, and are applied after the vessels have been turned to smooth them.

Each kind of work is done by a separate department of workmen, termed "plate makers," "handlers," etc., according to the articles they make.

The "turner" shapes and roughly smooths the vessel on the wheel, and it is then taken to the "greenhouse," or drying-house, where it is thoroughly freed from moisture.

Then, when furnished with its requisite adjuncts and dry, it is "towed" by women. This is the polishing of the ware, plates, cups, bowls, saucers, etc., before they are sent to the biscuit fining. The scouring raises much dust, which, if great precaution be not used, is inhaled by the operatives; and it is in this process that so much injury is done to the respiratory organs.

Since 1894 it has been imperative to employ fans for the creation of a draught which shall remove the dust, by drawing it away.

Pressed or moulded ware requires no polishing of the surface, except the seams left by the joints of the moulds, which have to be scraped away, and these are removed whilst the clay is still moist. When the article has been smoothed, and is dry, it is sent to the oven, where it is burnt, and leaves it as biscuit china, not so called because twice baked (bis-cuit), but because it bears a fancied resemblance to biscuit in consistency.

If the articles be of the commonest description they now receive their enamel decoration; but all the better-class work is coloured upon the "glost." To glaze the ware it is referred to the dipper, a man who plunges it into a liquid mixture in which lead predominates; and which, being opaque, covers the whole surface, and, if already painted, obscures the colouring.

He then hands the dipped article to girls, who carry it away to be cleaned after the dipper, and then to be dried, after which it is passed into the glost oven, when, subjected to heat, the opaque flux is resolved into a vitreous glaze.

The ware, on leaving the glost oven, is—if not of the commonest character—transferred to the colouring shops, where the coloured borders to plates, jugs, etc., and floral patterns on tea and coffee pots and cups are applied. Colour in a fluid condition is floated on an engraved metal plate, kept hot, and then the surface of the disc is carefully cleaned, leaving the pigment only in the depressions. To this, paper is next applied, which is pressed on the metal, and when withdrawn carries the colour with it, transferred to its surface. A young girl thereupon cuts the paper as required, passes it to another girl, who applies the strips or pieces to the article that has to be decorated, and presses it with a rubber so as to ensure adhesion. Then the paper is washed away.

This process is that of "transfer," and the article thus treated is again submitted to fire, in the kiln, which fuses the colours that are mixed with a flux, and combines them with the body of the vessel to which they have been applied. But "transfer" is not the sole method employed. It is comparatively harmless to those engaged upon it.

The mischief is done in the colour-dusting.

Sometimes the entire surface of the vessel has to be coloured, with the exception, it may be, of some floral decoration. How this is done, by oiling the surface and powdering the colour on with little pads of cotton wool, has been already described by Polly Myatt, and need not here be repeated.

If a broad band of colour be required on a circular article, as a plate or bowl, the medium is applied with a brush, or "pencil," as the local term is, whilst the vessel is spinning on a "wheel."

Colour is afterwards dusted on. This is called the "oil and dust" process. But if the pattern is to be of an irregular shape, the "stencil" is applied. A floral or other free pattern is never ground-laid but applied at once with a pencil, and such a process is perfectly harmless. Ground-laying is only for broad flat surfaces of colour or for majolica.

The deadly nature of the colour-dusting has called for the interference of Government; in 1894, rules were made that were imposed on occupiers and operatives. But these were hardly carried out with the strictness necessary for their success, and they were evaded—especially in the small workshops.

Again, in 1898, the Home Office issued rules, which, however, were not made compulsory, but were accepted by all the large firms and many of the smaller. Further rules were settled by arbitration in 1898, and came into force on January 1, 1899. If these rules be loyally carried out, and the operatives themselves are careful, then much of the mischief wrought by the lead and dust, as described in this story, will have come to an end.

One admirable rule determined upon, is that a certified surgeon shall visit and examine all the women and young persons engaged in the dangerous processes once a month, and he is empowered to order suspension from employment. Moreover, no person under fifteen years of age is now permitted to be employed in any of those processes which are especially harmful to young constitutions.

Whether the rules will be faithfully applied, everywhere, time will show. At present every case of lead-poisoning that comes into the hospitals, or under the notice of a doctor visiting private houses, has to be reported and duly investigated. But the public must be constantly on the alert against evasion of regulations and neglect of wholesome provisions.

Painting with liquid colour is harmless. This is performed by men and women. The highest class work is done by men, and artists of great talent are employed on this work, and are highly paid. A skilled artist will receive from one to fifteen pounds or more for decorating a vase or dessert plate.

But the technique of the painting is one that requires experience to acquire.

Colours change in the firing, and the painter has to bear in mind this transmutation, and has to apply his colours as he knows that they will eventually turn out after having been subjected to heat in the kiln, not as they appear when he lays them on.

Moreover, the medium is not easy of manipulation, and the glazed surface is difficult to treat.

Sometimes a piece before it is highly finished has to undergo repeated firings to fix the several paintings and final touches that have to be applied before it is considered complete; and it is this that renders such articles eminently costly.

By degrees "transfer" is driving true art farther into the background. But mechanical work such as that is no substitute for hand painting, in the eye of any man of taste. It is, of course, cheap, and that is its sole recommendation.

The painting is entirely in the hands of men, that is to say, the art painting, but women are employed to put in lesser sprigs and flowers, and are paid by the number they can do in a day.

. . . .

Joan laboured under a fond delusion when she supposed that she would be taken on as an artist; but that she had yet to learn. The hope that she might some day do better than work at that which was mechanical buoyed her up.

When Joan entered the workroom, she saw that she was at once an object of curiosity. She had inquired of Polly whether it would be expected of her that she should pay her footing, and Polly had answered—

"Certainly—it would be shabby not to do so."

But she had failed to inquire what amount would be considered suitable.

As several girls came about her, Joan, with a flutter of the heart, held out a couple of sovereigns.

She had brought her old liberal ideas with her, and could hardly have supposed that a florin would have sufficed. What is usually done, when a new hand comes into the shop, is for her to give a trifle, and the rest of those in it contribute their coppers, and with the sum all unite to have a simple tea. Sometimes they wait till several have paid their "footings," so as to have a great affair. But at the best it is very simple. It grows out of the widespread idea that a common meal serves as a friendly introduction of the new-comer to her future companions. The cup of tea is with these girls what the salt is to the desert Arab.

To Joan this was, or seemed to be, a most eventful occasion—a stepping into a new life, the beginning of working for her own livelihood, and it did not for a moment occur to her that what she offered was excessive. Divided up, the sum would be but a few shillings apiece—a cheap purchase of goodwill.

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Essie, looking at Joan's extended palm.

"I wish to pay my footing," said Joan falteringly; "is it too small a sum?"

"Small!" echoed Essie. "Take it back. We don't want your money. I say, girls, look at her! She wants to pay her footing with gold—and her father, a farmer, died bankrupt, and the landlord distrained, and sold the very bed from under her and her sister—and left them nothing but what they stood up in."

It was plain to Joan that a myth relative to her fortunes was in process of evolution.

"All these two girls have got," proceeded Essie, "is just some shillings kind friends scraped together to start them in this place. She—this one—has had to pay a month in advance for her house, and to furnish it, and she has been giving a lot of us real country butter."

"And butter is at one and fourpence," threw in a girl. "And here she comes and offers us two sovereigns for footings. Put them back in your pocket, and bring out half a crown; not one penny more will we have."

"Really," said Joan, looking round, "things are not so bad with me as Essie has represented. I can very well pay."

"It won't do," said Lena. "Then if another girl came, she'd be ashamed to be able to give only a shilling."

"It will never do," said several. "It will spoil everything. We only want to be friendly. We don't ask for money, and we won't have it — put that back."

"Well, then," said Joan, "then you shall have a florin or half a crown, and no more. But you must allow me my own way in one thing, if you have your own in this."

"What is that?"

"We are drawing near to Christmas. Polly Myatt tells me that holly is not to be got near here, and that what is brought into the market is poor stuff with few berries, and is very dear. I expect a hamper from my old home—the farm Essie spoke of," a flicker of a smile passed over her lips, "a hamper to be sent me previous to Christmas, full of holly well set with scarlet drops. Allow me to have the pleasure, as a token of my goodwill, to present everyone here with a sprig for your windows and mantelshelves."

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. MANGIN

A WEEK—ten days passed, and Joan had dropped into her place, and worked with a good courage. What fell to her to do was not particularly interesting, because not artistic. She had to paint in or enamel a certain number of flowers or leaves, all of the same pattern, and the payment was by the dozen. A particular leaf, bud, blossom, or insect was priced, and had to be reproduced a thousand times. The work was mechanical, but it was a first step that might lead to something better. It at least taught her facility in manipulation, and already she saw in what she had erred when an amateur. Confidence she felt that in a short time, if put on really artistic work, she would be able to take a good position among the others, and turn out satisfactory work. She had not as yet realised that, for a woman, art work was closed against her.

Sibyll proved useless in the house. Her attempts at cooking were failures, and daily did she demonstrate her incapacity to make beds and clean rooms.

At home she had constantly been remarkable for the disorder in which she left her own apartment, and the amount of unnecessary work she made for the servants; and now that she was without attendants, the faculty of order did not manifest itself in her. Never in all her life having done anything to help another, she now proved incapable of even helping herself.

She had settled into gloomy indifference. Joan did not scold her sister, though her carelessness was sufficiently provoking.

Polly Myatt came in, whenever she could, to assist, and, for the sake of the elder sister, disregarded the ill-humour of the younger, and laughed away her blunders.

At length Sibyll broke out—

"I can stand this no longer. Let me go into the works and do something there. I was not born to be a household drudge. I daresay I could earn money at the bank; I can do nothing in the house. I believe an overall is really becoming; but I will not be lead-poisoned even to please you, Joan."

"I would not allow you to do anything that is dangerous; you know that," answered the elder. "I will speak about you to Mr. Mangin."

Accordingly Joan took Sibyll to the office, and asked the manager to be so good as to furnish her sister with employment.

Mr. Mangin looked Sibyll over in a manner sufficiently insolent to flush Joan's cheek; but he disarmed her resent by saying—

"I'll take her. What is her age?"

"Eighteen."

"And a strong girl?"

"Yes. But there is one stipulation, sir, I am obliged to make—that my sister be not employed in any of the departments where lead is in use."

"Lead, lead!" shouted Mr. Mangin, flaring up. "What nonsense is this about lead? Lead we all use—we cannot do without it. You cannot draw water from a well without the employment of lead piping to the pump. You cannot solder tinned fruit and meats and vegetables without lead. You cannot glaze your windows without white lead or putty, to hold the glass in place. The tumbler out of which you drink has lead in the composition of the glass. You cannot employ hot-water pipes and gas pipes, but red lead comes in for sealing the joints. It is nonsense. Lead is just one of the necessaries of life. You are a fool, and have been scared by fools. I will tell you what the facts are. Every girl who wants a holiday pretends that she has been lead-poisoned. The wenches gad about at night in wet and cold, when they should be at home. They catch a chill that settles on the chest—and it is lead again. I find fault with them, because idle and wasteful, and they cry out that I have poisoned them. I will hear nothing against the lead, Frobisher, and let me inform you that if you say anything more on this topic, the firm will endeavour to get along without your valuable aid and meddlesomeness. Lead! lead indeed!" He glared at her. "I can't say what goes on at other banks: there may be slovenliness there, there may be the use of a reprehensible amount of lead, there may be raw lead used where fritted would serve, but I am not answerable for them. In the small and struggling banks there are none of the niceties and precautions seen to in the large concerns. But in Fennings! there is not so much lead used in the whole concern in a twelvemonth as would hurt a fly. There! Get to your task; your sister shall go into the warehouse."

In the evening, on her return from the works, in bounced Polly Myatt with a stormy face. She planted herself with her arms folded, and her feet well apart, just inside the doorway.

"What is the matter, Polly?" asked Joan, in consternation.

"Matter! What do you mean by taking up with Cissie Averill? Haven't I been your friend, and faithful to you?"

"Yes indeed, dear Polly, and you are my friend still, I trust."

"No, I am not. You have chucked me over for Cissie. It's too bad."

"But, Polly, I have not cast you aside. You are as dear to me as ever—nay, you become dearer to me every day."

"Do I now?"

"I assure you it is so. Not a day passes but you show me some new kindness, do me some fresh service, and I should be the basest of girls not to feel this."

"Then why have you taken on Cissie?"

"Why, Polly, because my sister is going to bank, and we shall need someone to prepare our meals and look to our house."

"Ain't I next door?"

"That is true, and next door to my heart also; but I must not lay too much upon you."

"It is nothing. Did I ever cry out that it was too much? I've naught to do at home but look after things for father and mother, and that don't take a prodigious time. Between whiles I can attend to what is wanting here, and I like to do so—it just serves as an amusement."

"That may be the case, but I feel scruples in asking too much of you."

"Then you don't deserve to have me as your pal."

"There has been another motive that has had weight with me," said Joan gently. "Cissie has become leaded. She has got the blue band on her lips, and may fall ill any day. She is an orphan, and so am I. She is homeless, and so was I till I took No. 16. She is alone in the world, whereas I have my sister and you."

"Well, then?"

"I felt that her case was worse than mine—for she was ill and I am not. I am able to do something for her. What little has to be accomplished in this house will not hurt her, unless she becomes seriously affected. I considered that it was my duty to attempt to help her. Should she break down, then, indeed, I shall need all the assistance you can give me and her. So I may have to ask of you a great deal more than you will care to give."

"Try me!" said Polly, relaxing, and her face breaking into smiles. She half seated herself on the table, one foot hanging down, and resting half her weight on one hand. "Very well! I'll pass it over for this once. I know Cissie is leaded, and has no friends—and the Skrimagers talked of being shut of her. So your sister is took on at bank?"

"Yes, Mr. Mangin has accepted her."

"I knew he would."

"Are there many vacancies?"

"Oh, not that! but she is so pretty."

Joan looked disconcerted and alarmed. Presently she rallied and said, smiling—

"You pay me a poor compliment, Polly. He was very unwilling to take me on."

"Oh! you—that was different. He saw at a glance what you are. Anyone with half an eye can read your face. You are not one to be got over with smooth words. Give your sister a bit of advice. She might not care to take it from me. Say to her, 'Keep the table between you and Charlie Mangin.'"

CHAPTER XIX

SOCIAL EVENINGS

SO soon as Joan had an hour that she could consider her own, she went "up bank," *i.e.* up hill, into the higher portion of the town, and rung at the surgery bell of a doctor of whom she had received an account as a man of probity, of much experience and good attainments.

She was shown into his presence.

He was a rugged man, with features rough-hewn by nature, and his hair bristling and resisting attempts to smooth and arrange it—supposing such attempts were made.

He looked at her attentively with sharp, searching eyes, and said—

"What is your name? Where do you live?"

"My name is Frobisher, and I live in the street by Fennings' bank, in which I work."

"Humph! You were not born here, don't belong here, and were in better circumstances."

"Excuse me, sir, I did not come to your surgery to discuss where I was born, or what were my circumstances, but to obtain a professional opinion."

"Go on, then. What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I am quite well."

"Then what the devil do you mean by trespassing on my time? Time means money. What do you want? Not to study my pretty face, and sniff at my bottles."

"I have come about two friends," said Joan, undismayed by his roughness, "both of whom have been lead-poisoned."

"Oh, lead! lead again! *et toujours le plomb jusque à la fin.*"

"*Mais c'est vrai,*" she answered, without a moment's consideration, accustomed as she had been to converse in French with her Parisian governess.

"Ah! *vous êtes moitié Française?*"

"*Du tout, monsieur!*" said Joan, laughing. "*Cependant, revenons á nos moutons s'il vous plait.*"

"*Bien, mademoiselle.* What do you want?"

"As I said, I have two friends suffering from lead-poisoning. One is merely deadly white and languid, and seems to be devoid of energy—and I notice there is a trembling as of palsy. The other has lost the use of her right hand. She lives next door, and is very dear to me, and I desire to know whether the lead in both cases will lead to further mischief, or whether the poison can be counteracted and the patients recovered."

"Why have you not brought them here?"

"Because these are but samples of many cases; and I know that you must be familiar with all the symptoms and consequences of lead-poisoning. I am associated with girls working in the deadly processes of colour-dusting, glost-placing and ground-laying, majolica-painting and ware-cleaning after the dipper. A stitch in time saves nine. I may be of use, as I am in the bank, and in daily intercourse with those in whom the poison is beginning to work, or who are merely menaced. If I knew the proper treatment to adopt, so soon as the symptoms appear, bad cases might be checked. Now as to the two about whom I inquire principally—what is to be done? Can they be pulled round? Both of these cases in which I am interested are no longer subject to further contact with lead. What is to be done for others, as they fall out of health from the same cause?"

"You are a sensible young woman. I wish there were more like you. The very best advice I can offer, relative to such as show symptoms of plumbism, is to give over at once."

"There one is met by this difficulty. The girls have to earn their daily bread. They are in dire fear of abandoning their places in the bank lest others should step in whilst they are recruiting, and so, when recovered, they find no opening for them. For this reason, the poor things do all in their power to conceal or disguise the ravages of the poison."

"I know they do. More fools they."

"But consider. They have no sum of money on which to fall back if taken ill."

"Their own fault. They have put it all on their backs."

"Granted that some have been so inconsiderate, yet it is not so with all. They are young, they have not been long out of their apprenticeship—and you must know that, as apprentices, their earnings are very small. Suppose that they have been receiving full wages for three or four years. Out of this poor sum is it possible for them to form a fund that will sustain them through the months of enforced idleness, whilst they are slowly recovering? However, I have not come to discuss that point. I desire information. What is to be done? I am bewildered. Some say lemons, some milk, and some — but these are men — swear by beer."

"Lemons are useless. Beer is of some value as a solvent, and serves as an excuse for a soak."

"Will you write me a page of directions? I assure you that I will carry them out as fully and as exactly as I am permitted by my not over docile patients."

"I will do it for you, *de bon cœur*," said the surgeon, seating himself at his desk.

"And, sir, if you please, be legible and do not form the hieroglyphics intended only to be deciphered by chemists."

The medical man laughed, and began to write.

Presently he looked up, and said with a mild oath—

"I cannot see why in the devil's name we should employ so much lead in our English potteries. I have been at Sèvres and at Limoges. Little is employed there, or only such as is fritted, the lead oxide united with silicic acid, so as to form a lead silicate, which is almost harmless, though such as do the fritting run considerable risks. With us, from generation to generation it must be the same lead, at the cost of health and life. There," said he, thrusting a sheet of paper towards her, "I'll make you up the stuff, iodide of potassium, as you require it, and we shall never quarrel over the price—because it shall cost you nothing. Iodide of potassium is the one thing you will need, and let 'em tipple sulphuric acid daily—diluted, of course."

. . . .

With regard to her visitors, Joan found it necessary to frame certain regulations and make limitations.

Her first acquaintances were desirous of introducing others, their own friends, and pleaded hard for them. In her workshop were girls who drew to her as if influenced by a magnetic attraction, and who craved to be added to the number of those who had the privilege of *entrée* to No. 16.

The evenings had grown into an institution, and had, accordingly, to be given shape. The dimensions of the parlour would not admit a crowd being assembled in it. Joan had to fix days and hours, and limit the visits of her friends to certain evenings within specified hours. At first the girls sat over the fire, and about the room, and gossiped, cooked chestnuts, baked potatoes in the ashes, or toasted apples. They told tales, sang, and took to playing games.

Joan encouraged them to bring needlework, stockings that had to be darned, and dresses to be mended. They were merry beings, amused with trifles, pleased to be in Joan's parlour; were very candid in their opinions, frank in their judgments; very open in revealing their own foibles and failings; and they were much disposed to make a confidante of their hostess.

Sibyll unbent slightly, but never treated the girls as equals, always addressing them in a tone and with a manner that implied her own superiority. Joan saw that this wounded, and would have been resented had not her visitors been willing to swallow their mortification upon her account.

"I do think this is really too bad," said Sibyll one day.

"What is too bad?"

"A piano. You are never weary of twanging on the string of our straitened means, and yet—here comes in a cottage piano. You know that I am not musical and do not care to play, and that you have no time for hammering on the notes. This is, simply and solely, good money thrown away."

"But, my dear Sibyll!"

"I know what you are about to say—that you have bought it so as to accompany those girls in their singing. As it is—you do a great deal too much for them, much that is most uncalled for."

"My dear Sibyll, you are premature. Not a penny of our money has gone for this piano. They have clubbed their poor little savings together, and without a word to me have hired it for the winter months. It is most kind."

"Kind! really, Joan, you are bewitched. They have done it for themselves, for their own pleasure."

"It is intended as a pleasure to me. Tell me frankly, Sibyll, are they not nice girls?"

"For their class they are not amiss—but, of course, they are not ladies."

"Sibyll, we are, after all, made out of the same clay. Some are biscuit, some have been passed through the dipper's trough, and have been glost over. I am not sure that the dip or the colour-dusting that you consider qualifies the lady is not in some cases deleterious. That which constitutes the true lady is the stuff underneath, the ware, and not the glost—good feeling, consideration for others, a clean mind, and an honest heart; and that these girls have. Sibyll, there is coarse brown ware that is flashed over with a film and looks very fine, but every chip reveals the mean material beneath."

"We shall never think alike," said the younger, and put on her hat and cloak.

"Why! Where are you going?" asked Joan.

"Out. I am not bound to be here all the time that you have your At Home, and I won't."

Before Joan could detain her, she had whisked through the door and was gone.

Next moment Polly Myatt came in; she looked doubtfully towards Joan, and stood rubbing her maimed hand with the other.

"What is it, Polly?" asked Joan. "I have got to know you so well that I can read your mind in your honest face at a glance. You are wishful to say something, and yet do not quite know how to say it."

"It is this," answered the girl. "I don't want to seem to be a sneak, but—your sister is so young."

"Well, and what of that?"

"There has been Caroline Grosser waiting for her a few doors off, and they have gone into the town together."

"Caroline Grosser—I do not know her."

"But your sister does. She is not one of us. She's a bit wild. There is no real wickedness in her, but she's giddy, and she is no good company for your sister. That is what I say, but do not call me a sneak. I wouldn't have harm come to her, and bring trouble thereby to you, not for all that Fennings' bank is worth."

CHAPTER XX

A HAMPER OF HOLLY

TWO days before Christmas Hector Beaudessart arrived at the station together with a large and heavy hamper, which he consigned to the porter, and bade him take charge of it till it was called for.

Hector was not quite easy in his mind in accompanying the promised supply of holly.

The Frobisher girls had distinctly emphasised their desire not to be traced; but a good deal of concern had been prevalent in the neighbourhood of Pendabury as to their fate. Some thought that they were in a condition of real destitution, and that they had disappeared from the district, ashamed to have their state known and talked about. They had no relations, though they had many friends.

Rumours more or less extravagant and absurd circulated concerning them.

Hector's mother had been greatly troubled on their account, and Hector's mind had been disturbed.

At length the tension became unendurable; he resolved on risking the displeasure of Joan Frobisher, and on discovering in what condition she and her sister actually were, so as to intervene in a peremptory manner, should they be in difficulties. He was determined, if possible, not to show himself, and not to allow them to become aware that he had made inquiries about them. He would but satisfy his own mind and that of his mother, without disconcerting Joan, unless there were real occasion for his appearing on the scene.

He was too honourable not to shrink from the semblance of doing an ungentlemanly act, such as prying into the condition of the girls might be taken to be. Yet he felt that a duty devolved upon him to act, so far as might be, as their protector, against possible dangers into which, in their ignorance of the world, they might unwarily step. They were young, and had no natural guardian; they were badly off, and someone must assume a right to see that they did not succumb under their misfortunes, and no other person had so great a claim to do so as himself.

By this means he satisfied his conscience.

As Hector stood outside the straggling station, looking up a long road that had not as yet dared to call itself a street, doubtful what to do and whither to go, he was accosted by an urchin of apparently twelve years, to judge by his size, but with an old-young face that might belong to one at any age under twenty. The eye was bright and the face smooth; there were, however, hollows under the temples, and sunken cheeks and a pinched throat that proclaimed privation.

"Shall I carry your portmantle, sir?"

"No, thank you—not just now. Let me see. Do you belong to the station?"

"No, sir, the station belongs to me. I'm one of the gen'l public, and if the gen'l public didn't favour it, where'd the Co. be as runs the line?"

"Are you here all day?"

"Yes, sir, and part of the night."

"I daresay you would not object to earn half a crown?"

"None at all, but why split it? Stretch a point and make it a crown. But nothing underhand, you know."

"No impertinence! There is a hamper of holly left at the station to be called for. I want you to watch and discover who fetches it, and whither it is taken, and then to inform me."

"Shell out!" shouted the boy. "Right you are."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm the chap commissioned to fetch that there 'amper when it arrives."

"It is addressed to a Miss Frobisher."

"I know her, Joan. She's a topper. She sent me arter it yesterday, but it hadn't come to 'and; so I was bid look out for it to-day. I've earned that 'arf-crown fair and honourable, so you plank up at once."

"You scaramouch, you shall have it. Go at once and fetch the hamper—but I forewarn you, it is too heavy for you to carry."

"Then there's something in it more than holly," said the boy, with a wink.

"That is no concern of yours. You are to convey it to Miss Frobisher's house."

"All right, guv'ner. I'll borrer a barrer over at yond coalshed to begin with. They know me there, intimate; and me and the manager entertains mutual respect. I'll 'ave the 'amper on a barrer in the cock of yer eye."

"Stay a moment. What do you know of Miss Frobisher? Does she live at a distance?"

"Every blessed place is at a distance from this bloomin' station, heaven farthest of all. Know Joan Frobisher?—of course I do. I'm invited to eat my Christmas dinner with her. Got the invite card at 'ome, stuck in my glass, with R.S.V.P. in the corner."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Hector, reddening, and staring at the boy.

"True; I was so afraid of forgettin' it, that I thort I'd tie a knot in my pockernankey, and I twisted about to look for it—but blowed I haven't one, so I knotted up my fingers, as serves the same purpose instead. Look, here you are!" And he held up one hand with the fingers curled together.

The boy leered roguishly into Hector's face.

"Now do you believe the word of a gem'man? I know them gals, intimate, I do. When the Wake comes, and there's 'oliday, see if I don't take off the elder to the seaside and give 'er a buster on ginger pop and shrimps."

"Look here, you unmitigated piece of effrontery, I want to know where the Misses Frobisher live; but spare me your impudence."

"You can foller yer betters. Come arter me and my barrer, and see for yourself."

"The young ladies," exclaimed Hector, "are a sort of relation of mine."

He was vexed with himself for stooping to an explanation to such an imp.

"Oh, ah!" said the boy, turning his head to leer at him, "do you see any green in my eye?" He shook his lean sides with laughing. "Oh yes! that's about it, eh? There's a speakin' family likeness, I must say. You've the fine, languishing brown eyes of Joan, and both the gals has your curled parsnip 'air, ain't they? You weren't born to be a Lipton and make your fortune out of gammon, 'ome cured, prime cut; so don't attempt to try it on, when you're not qualified for success in that line."

The boy scampered away, splashing regardlessly through mud in quest of a wheelbarrow, and when he had obtained one, went for the hamper, which he mounted on it, and started trundling his load along the way to the town.

Hector looked about him. The place was smoke-blackened, rain-soddened under a sky like a ragged, dripping umbrella. Not a bush, not a tree; only coils of smoke rolling across the sky. Moisture trickled from the grimy faces of the habitations like tears of diluted blacking. The wet wind piped in the electric wires. Trams ran by screaming. No sign of beauty, no sound of sweetness, no savour of health were there.

"Boy," said Hector, striding to the side of the lad, "can you tell me whether—Miss Frobisher is likely to be at home when you arrive with the hamper?"

"And you tailing 'arter?" asked Tom, winking.

"Is she likely to be at home, I asked."

"Give me a cigarette, and I'll return you an answer."

"It is bad for an undersized chap like you to smoke. Tobacco is poison to children," said Hector, nevertheless giving the boy what he had desired.

"Then you should 'ave the sense to deny me," retorted the boy. "You've no moral courage, and no 'igh principles, you 'aven't, and I'm ashamed of yer. You're of a piece with the gen'l public, you are. The gen'l public when they wants a thing will 'ave it, and don't care what suffrin' and ill is done to those who pervide—so long as they gets it."

"But you," said Hector, "knowing it to be bad for your growth, should refrain from smoking."

"Bah! To make me grow, it requires beef and mutton. It's none of them I'm like to get. I'll enjoy my cigarette, and when my time comes, I'll turn up my toes to the cinders, as there ain't no daisies to turn 'em to."

"You have not answered my question."

"The gals will be at the bank."

"What bank? The Staffordshire County Bank?"

"Get along with you for a greenhorn. The potbank is where they are, making ware for you to eat off and drink your corfey out of and wash your 'ands in. Do you twig now, guv'ner?"

"Are they working there?"

"You don't think they're gone there to choose a twenty guinea set o' dessert plates, do you?"

"What is your name, boy?"

"If yer want to draw me out a cheque, it's Tom Treddlehoyle, Esquire, of the Marlpit corner."

"Tom, answer me civilly, and serve me honestly"—

"Couldn't do no other," interrupted the urchin.

"And I will reward you handsomely. Do you mean, in sober seriousness, to tell me that Miss Frobisher"—

"Oh! ah! it's the elder you're thinking on."

"Be quiet and attend to what I say. Do you seriously inform me that the Misses Frobisher are engaged in a pot factory as common hands?"

"They're rather uncommon hands, I take it," replied the lad. "For one is a right and left hand together, and the t'other is just no hand at all. Of course they work. How else is folk to live? Don't you work?"

Hector was silent for a few moments.

He thought of Pendabury and its luxury, and the contrast in the life of these girls; between its ease and indulgence at one time, and its present toil.

"Tom," said Hector after a while, "I do not wish to let myself be seen by them nor that they should know that I have instituted inquiries about them. They have friends who will not allow them to want."

"They are not like to want — unless they get leaded."

"Leaded!"

"Ay, poisoned with the lead. Many do. They must take their chance with the rest. There—this is the street, and yonder is Fennings' bank, where they work. No. 16 is their house. Will you knock?"

"No," said Hector, "I do not choose to be seen. Tom, seal your tongue with this," and he put half a sovereign into the lad's hand.

CHAPTER XXI

A CHRISTMAS DINNER

IN the evening, when Joan and Sibyll arrived from the bank, they found the hamper in their back kitchen, whither it had been carried by Tom and Cissie.

On being opened, it proved to contain, as might have been suspected from the weight, a good deal more than holly—a goose, a ham, a plum-pudding, and mince pies.

There were flowers as well from the greenhouses—primulas, Roman hyacinths, azaleas, salvias, and of holly abundance, rich with scarlet berries—sufficient to enable Joan to redeem her promise at the bank. On top of all was a card:

" *With Mrs. Beaudessart's warmest greetings for Christmas, and best wishes for the New Year.*"

" Some of the holly and flowers for the church first," said Joan. " After that a good bunch to every one of those to whom I undertook to give a sprig. I shall add a few flowers, and what is over is for our girls."

Sibyll was pleased at the sight of the good things.

"It is very thoughtful and kind of Mrs. Beaudessart," said Joan.

"Bah! she can afford to be generous, now she has taken everything from us," observed Sibyll.

"You do not know her, or you would put a more charitable construction on her conduct," observed Joan.

"Oh, I do not doubt that it is kindly meant. At the same time it affords a certain amount of satisfaction to be gorgeously patronising."

"For which reason you take up Caroline Grosser."

"Caroline! Oh, she serves to pass the time. She is lively and amusing. I have as much right as have you to choose friends among the lower classes—now that we are debarred from associating with those who are on our level."

"Let her come and take part in our little homely gatherings."

"No, thank you. She does not care for your lot of girls, and it is a relief to me to get out of their way."

To this Joan made no reply. Presently Sibyll remarked—

"What I disapprove of, Joan, is that the girls who come here treat you with familiarity."

"You have not heard them say one rude word."

"Perhaps not, but they do not regard you with the deference that is your due as a lady by birth and education."

"I have no right to expect that. They know nothing of our former condition. I have no complaint to make against any of them. They are always kindly. They are readily swayed by my wishes, and willing to accept my advice, which, indeed, they seek. But it would be presumptuous in me to dictate to them or exact from them what they are not willing cheerfully to accord."

"We are ladies, and, thank goodness, some people are not so dense as to fail to observe that."

"To whom do you refer?"

"To Mr. Mangin, for instance. He has remarked me, and invariably singles me out from the rest. He is most respectful, and never presumes. As he told me himself one day, he knew a lady when he saw her."

"Does Mr. Mangin often go into your work-room?"

"Off and on—and it makes the rest jealous to see how much notice he takes of me."

"Remember what Polly said: Keep the table between you and Mangin. I do not like what I have both seen and heard of that man."

"Oh, those who are not spoken to growl with spite. He is a gentleman, that is to say, as far as a man can be a gentleman who is in trade. He is only manager, but some day will be a partner. The

Fennings have a fine country seat, and do not often come in—they leave everything with Mr. Mangin. When he becomes one of the firm I have no doubt he also will buy a place and take on some fellow to look to the business, and himself keep clear of it —except, of course, drawing money out of it."

Joan was uneasy, but deemed it prudent to say no more on the matter.

Sibyll was self-willed in the old days at Pendabury, and now under a reverse of fortune had turned stubborn and contrary. She seemed to derive a positive pleasure from taking up and pursuing a course which did not commend itself to her sister. She was vain, and what Joan dreaded was lest Caroline Grosser should play on this quality, and draw her sister into objectionable society, to the objectionableness of which she would be blind if she were made much of; and she feared lest the attentions of Mangin should be encouraged through this same infirmity.

"I do not see that Cissie Averill is going to be much good to us," said Sibyll. "She is dreadfully slow, and sits more than half her time mooning over the fire. I really do think that, if we took a servant, we should have engaged one likely to be more useful."

"We pay her nothing," said Joan.

"But she is hardly worth her keep."

"She is suffering from the effects of lead, but this will work off in time. I have been to the doctor about her, and"—

"This tops everything!" burst forth Sibyll. "We have to pay a doctor's bill for her, and medicines—I have seen the bottles—and you have ordered in a preposterous amount of milk."

"It is required for her."

"Good heavens! Are we to live for our servants, or are they to live to minister to us?" exclaimed Sibyll, boiling up.

"We all live for each other, are bound into one body; if one member suffers all the members suffer with it—that is what an apostle said, nearly two thousand years ago, and the world has not yet taken it sincerely to heart. I know that Cissie is trembling on the verge of a breakdown of the entire nervous system. Unless she be treated aright now, she may become paralysed as is Polly—even worse—and then there would be no chance of recovery. That is why I have taken her. I am going to turn up my sleeves and fight the lead, and rescue her young life."

"And convert this house into a hospital?"

"She will become daily more serviceable to us as we get the lead out of her blood. Now she is a mere wreck."

"What is milk a pint, I'd like to know?" asked Sibyll, and then, "You have been getting eggs as well, and not for my eating. Are they also for our servant?"

"Yes, but do not be disconcerted, Sibyll. I pay for all out of my own earnings. Cissie shall be made sound, and when this weak member is whole our entire community will rejoice with it."

"I have no doubt but that you are wonderfully humane and Christian, and all that sort of thing; but I cannot go your length. Charity, I have ever heard, begins at home."

"And, never leaving it, becomes selfishness."

Cissie did bestir herself over the preparations for Christmas dinner.

She had Joan to assist her, but the sight, the smell of the goose were enough to stimulate the most languid faculties, and the steam of the plum-pudding to quicken the pulsation of the feeblest heart.

Practically the greater portion of the cooking fell to Joan herself. She had gone to church in the very early morning so as to allow her sister to attend later, and to give herself the house clear for the grand preparation of the midday meal.

She laid the white cloth, arranged knives and forks, placed a glass in the middle of the table with Christmas roses and holly in it—flowers and shrubs, as she said to herself, "from dear old Pendabury."

Tumblers sparkled, all was clean and fresh. As Joan contemplated it with cheerful face and flushed cheek, she thought that the whole set-out had a more attractive appearance, humble though it might be, than if it had been laid by a butler, and the spoons and forks had been of silver instead of being plated.

The room was redolent of roast goose.

She was awaiting her sister and Cissie, looking with pride, now at the table, then taking a peep at the meal that was being cooked, when a tap sounded at the door, and, without any response, Tom Treddlehoyle entered.

"Here I am," said the urchin. "I laid awake all last night kicking myself to be sure not to forget that I was invited to dine with you to-day. I wish yer all the complerments of the season, and an 'appy New Year, and an 'usband, and plenty of them."

Joan laughed, but she was somewhat disconcerted.

"I promised you a cut from our plum-pudding, Tom, no more than that."

"Ah!" said the boy, "and me sniffin' goose now. You can't deny me a slice of that. I ain't partic'lar; I'll put up with the breast. To tell yer the truth, now, I've never had a bit o' goose atween my teeth, no, never, and goose and Joan Frobisher will ever be together in my mind from this day."

The little wretch had done his utmost to make himself respectable. He had washed his face and hands, not perhaps as exactly as you or I would perform the operation. As it was, it left the nails ebonised, and grime lurked in the furrows of his face and neck. He had done what he could to fasten his rags together, by darning and pinning, and he had combed his hair as well as was feasible with ten fingers.

The efforts he had made to render himself presentable only brought out into prominence the misery of the boy, his sharp features and the bones of his skull, and revealed how colourless was his face, hollow his cheek, and how sunken were his eyes.

Now and then he coughed. Altogether a pathetic figure, and Joan's eyes became soft and her lips quivered as she looked at him. He glanced up at her—saw what was in her face, and a light, a transforming gleam, passed through his countenance and burnt in his eyes as he smiled in response.

At that moment in came Sibyll, and stood stock still, holding her hymn and prayer book, and stared.

"What is this fiend here for?" she asked.

"Come to dine with you, my dear, by special invite," answered the urchin.

"This is beyond all endurance," exclaimed Sibyll, flushing dark red. "I cannot, and I positively will not, eat my Christmas dinner if this horrible cobbold comes near the table. He is enough to turn any stomach."

"Young 'ooman," said Tom, "a king of creation feeds by himself—and his slaves by theirselves. I reserves to my private use the back kitchen ; it's nearer the goose and the pudden."

"He wheeled the hamper from the station," said Joan apologetically. "It is but fair that he should have a taste, and take toll of the good things he brought us."

"Then," said Sibyll sarcastically, "I presume you have invited the stoker and the driver of the train in which they came, and the woman who plucked the goose, and the negroes who grew and prepared the sugar, and the farmer from Corfu, who collected and dried the currants? They have all contributed to our dinner, and have just the same right to share in it."

"Sibyll, he shall sit by the fire in the back kitchen, and Cissie will be only too pleased to attend to his needs. Listen to his hollow cough!"

So it was arranged. Tom was content, and disappeared.

As soon as he was gone, Sibyll's good-humour returned, and the dinner passed off without unpleasantness.

When it was over, Joan put four mince pies into a paper bag, twisted up the corners, and took them into the back kitchen. She had ascertained from Cissie that the youth had eaten as much as was good for him. These she intended for him to take away and consume as he was able.

She heard him cough, and on entering noticed that he was planted on a low stool by the fire, with one leg over the other, and the foot raised. At once she exclaimed—

"Why, Tom, you poor fellow! You have no soles to your shoes."

He laughed.

"I goes in for appearances, I does. Soles don't show. I've not had a balance at my bankers, so I 'ave 'ad to be savin' in shoe leather. However, times be mendin', and I'm going to indulge in a new pair for the New Year. The gem'man gave me half a yellow boy. Look!" He spun a ten-shilling piece in the air. "All for showing the way here." He coloured. "Blow it, I've let the cat out of the bag."

"What gentleman?" asked Joan.

"I'm not going to say another word—no, not another letter of a word."

"And you clear out of this," said Cissie; "we want the kitchen for washing up."

"I'll hook it, lest by accerdent you put me in the pail."

He stalked through the little parlour.

As he did so, "Joan!" exclaimed Sibyll. "What does he mean, that horrible imp? Look what faces he is making at you and me."

Tom had his tongue thrust into his cheek, and was making grimaces and winking.

"Oh! ah!" said he, and chuckled. "Relations, of course. There's such a strong family resemblance, ain't there? He's got yer rolling black eye, and you 'ave his clusterin' brown 'air. Oh! eh! wanted, did 'e, to see where 'is young female relations 'ung out? Partic'larly the elder one! Fine!"

And he was gone.

CHAPTER XXII

THEATRE TICKETS

ON the following evening, after tea, Joan sat down to write a letter to Mrs. Beaudessart, thanking her for the Christmas hamper. At the same time she purposed intimating to her, as delicately as might be, that she was aware that her place of retreat had been discovered by means of the hamper, and that she trusted it would not be divulged. For, indeed, she could not consider the words dropped by Tom as implying anything other than that Hector Beaudessart had tracked her.

She wrote—

" I do not head this letter with our address, as my sister and I are still particularly desirous of being left undisturbed whilst we settle down into our new quarters and new mode of life. We are well aware of the kindness of our friends ; we are sure that they are only too ready to press on us their generous and well-intentioned assistance ; but we have resolved to remain independent, and the many kind offers certain to be made would only embarrass us. But pray assure everyone that we are in cosy quarters, are very well, and active."

She looked up, and saw Sibyll dressed to go out. The day was a general holiday, and Joan had remained at home. Now evening had fallen thick and dark. On that evening there was no expectation of the girls dropping in, and Joan had calculated on spending it quietly with her sister.

There was an indescribable something in Sibyll's look and manner that filled Joan with apprehension; she remained with pen poised in her hand, and her eyes fixed inquiringly on her. Sibyll manifested uneasiness. She said—

"I should like to take the key with me, so as not to disturb you, Joan, when I return. I may be late."

"Late, Sibyll! Whither are you going?"

"I shall be with Caroline Grosser. In fact, we have been given tickets for the theatre."

"Tickets for the theatre!"

Joan was too greatly astounded to do more than repeat the words.

"Yes," Sibyll explained; "it is most considerate of Mr. Mangin. He has sent me a ticket, and has given one to Caroline, and we are going together. There is to be a pantomime—'Cinderella,' I believe—and a grand transformation scene. Life has become so intolerably formal and dull here, that one is glad of the smallest flash of brightness in it."

Joan had recovered herself.

"This is impossible, Sibyll," she said gravely. "You cannot accept a ticket from the manager. It is unseemly. You, who are so nice about remaining a lady, should know that to do so would be indecorous."

"I don't know that. I have no reason to suppose that he intends going with us."

"There should not be a doubt entertained on the matter. It places you under an obligation to a man at the head of the establishment in which you are a hand, and he one who does not bear a high character."

"That is mere slander."

"It may be so — I trust it is so. But, Sibyll, consider that our father is but recently dead."

"Oh, no one here knows that!"

"Everyone in Fennings' bank knows it. And to-day — Boxing Day — more than half the young people from Fennings' will be at the theatre. I really cannot allow you to go. In your own heart I am convinced that you feel it would not be decent to appear at the pantomime dressed in deepest mourning."

"I made sure you would growl."

"I appeal to your own good feelings. Sibyll, with the thought of our dear father taken from us not three months ago, can you engage in this pleasure?"

The girl stood crestfallen and irresolute. Then Joan said—

"My dearest, you have much to bear—I know it well; but do not act so that self-reproach may add its sting to your present distress. Give me the ticket."

"But Caroline is awaiting me at the head of the street."

"Well, give me the ticket, and I will go to her and explain why you cannot accept it."

Sibyll surrendered, but not with good grace.

Joan took an envelope and slipped the ticket into it, then put on her hat and went forth.

At the extremity of the street, under a lamp, lounging against the post, was Caroline, very smartly dressed.

"Well, you have kept me waiting," said the girl, not at the first glance noticing which of the sisters approached, "and the wind cuts through one like a razor. What! Where is Sibyll?"

"Caroline," answered Joan, "I have come instead. I have come to inform you that she cannot accompany you. As you are perhaps not aware, I may tell you that our dear father died lately, and on this account my sister is unable to go to a place of public amusement."

"But," said Caroline, "Charlie Mangin will be awfully put out. I know he intends giving us a jolly good supper afterwards at the Blue Boar."

"Indeed! Did my sister know of this as well as you?"

"No. It was to be a surprise sprung on her."

"Then I am most thankful my sister has declined to accept. Carrie! do you consider how very indiscreet it is in you to receive such a favour?"

"Oh, there is no harm."

"No harm in a jolly good supper—but, do think for a moment what will be said. How your character will suffer."

"No one will know. He is not going to the theatre with us; he has got some temperance or other silly stuff meeting going on this evening, which he must attend."

"The whole affair is bound to come out. There are eyes everywhere; in a pottery are many pitchers, and all have long ears. Your own self-respect will prevent you from rushing into so compromising an act."

"Oh, I'm not so sure of that. I like a pantomime, and I adore a good supper."

"This is thoughtlessness, Carrie, and nothing more," said Joan. "From all I hear of you, I learn that you have a good heart, and your sole fault is want of looking before you leap. You are now about to fall into a trap. Do look ahead and mark where you go. Tell me frankly, has not the notice taken of my sister by Mr. Mangin been matter of comment in the bank?"

"Well, I daresay it may have been so."

"And what would be thought of her were it known, as it assuredly would be, that she had taken a theatre ticket from him, and afterwards had supped with him at the Blue Boar?"

"Not alone—I was invited as well."

"Carrie, I am quite sure you have no evil intent. But what shame and misery it would cause me if it came out, what humiliation and agony of remorse to Sibyll! And what, think you, would be the public verdict on you as the one who led her into such a situation? Now, my dear girl, I do entreat you not to go."

"But he has ordered supper."

"You do not know it, you only suppose so. There is plenty of time for him to countermand it if he has given instructions for its preparation. Let me have your ticket, and allow me to go to his house and return it. I will say that, owing to my sister being in mourning, she cannot accept his kind offer of the ticket, and that with your good heart you have resolved on keeping her company. You shall spend the evening with us, Carrie. We will have in Polly Myatt, and enjoy a game of Old Maid, or Sheep's Head. I have goose giblets and mince pies for supper."

"Goose! where did you get goose?"

"Some friends in the country sent it. And, in addition, we have mince pies. Carrie, will not this draw you?"

"All right. I daresay I was stupid. Here is the ticket. You really will explain matters?"

"I will go immediately to Lavender Lodge."

"Mind his mother — she's awfully prim, and swallowed a poker when young."

"I shall know what to do. You go to No. 16, and Sibyll will be delighted to have your company, and do her best to entertain you; so also will I, when I return."

"I meant no harm—I really did not."

"I know it, Carrie. I cannot tell you how I esteem you for readily surrendering your pleasure to do what you know to be right."

"Oh, for the matter of that, I can go to the theatre at any time, and am not so hard up but that I can pay for my own ticket. But goose giblets, I can't get them every day, and I want to pile up good luck for the new year by eating a lot of mince pies."

"No, Carrie, you cannot deceive me thus. It is not the giblets, it is not the mince pies that induce you to give up the pantomime, but your own true, honest heart and healthy conscience."

CHAPTER XXIII

LAVENDER LODGE

LAVENDER LODGE, the residence of the manager of Fennings' bank, where he lived along with his widowed mother, was not a large house, for, indeed, in this pottery town there were few large houses ; but it was distinguished from the habitations of the artisans by having a window on each side of a central door, and the doorway was decorated with a pair of pilasters, and a pediment, painted drab, and repainted annually to preserve them from absolute nigritude.

It had an upper storey with three windows. The house was set back from the street, as though it had withdrawn itself in conscious superiority, leaving an oblong open space between the front of the house and the street from which it was railed off.

This space, supposed to be a garden, contained two quadrangular beds of black soil composed of fragments of tile and cinders, and a modicum of earth in worm-cast, with a pyramid of clinkers in the midst of each, serving as rockeries, in which, however, no green thing grew except chickweed, which will grow anywhere, and which adorns nothing, and a solitary tuft of hart's-tongue fern that was only kept alive by Mrs. Mangin sponging the fronds every week.

In a pottery town everything that elsewhere is constructed of or laid in stone is dealt with in earthenware. Accordingly, the footways are paved with tiles, and kerbs of steps are of the same material.

From the iron gate, the iron of which was diseased and broke out in rusty sores through the paint, such a tile-paved path led to the front door, bordered by terra-cotta edgings, of a florid character—the only florid thing about a flowerless garden.

Joan ascended a couple of steps, and put her hand to the knocker. By the time she had wiped her fingers free from the dirt adhering to the hammer a maid appeared, who asked what she wanted. Joan replied, and was invited to enter the lobby, and the servant spoke with Mrs. Mangin through a side door into one of the sitting-rooms.

Then a stiff old lady, tall and hard in face, came out, looked scrutinisingly at Joan, and having apparently satisfied herself, asked what she required.

"I have come here to see Mr. Mangin about a small matter."

"He is out, but expected shortly. Can I take a message?"

"I wish particularly to give it to him myself."

Again the widow studied Joan, and said, "If you like, you may come into the room and sit down. It is chilly in the passage, and I daresay Mr. Fenning will not object."

She led the way into a little parlour, that served for a dining-room, as might be judged from the existence of a cruet-stand on a sideboard, and from a general flavour of stale meals that clung to the atmosphere. The walls were covered with leather paper. Against that, opposite the window, and above the sideboard and cruets, hung in heavy tarnished gold frames the portraits of the late Mr. Mangin and of his wife, taken ten years previously. The painting was hard and unidealised.

The pictures were calculated to strike the impartial observer with wonder that the late Mr. Mangin should ever have been drawn by tender feelings towards so wooden and grim a lady, and that the lady could ever have been induced under any consideration to swallow such a pill as the late Mr. Mangin.

By the table sat an elderly gentleman, leaning his elbow on it, and with his chin in his hand.

"You will not mind, Mr. Fenning, if I let this young lady sit here? She wishes to speak with my son."

"Not at all. He will be here soon, I think you said?"

"I trust so. If you had written word, he would have made a point of conscience to await you."

"A bit of business was thrust on me—one does not expect orders to rain in on Christmas and Boxing Days. I drove over at once on receipt of a letter by the evening delivery. I can wait a few moments."

He looked at Joan, who had taken a seat near the door. Mrs. Mangin misinterpreted the look, and said—

"Of course she shall wait your convenience, till you have had your interview with Charles."

"Not at all. Ladies take precedence." Then a little doubtfully, "You are not in any way concerned in our business—Fennings' bank?"

"Yes, sir, I am in it—in the painting-room," and Joan rose from the chair to make answer.

"Sit down, sit down!" said he emphatically.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" exclaimed Mrs. Mangin. "I did not for a moment suppose—in fact, I thought that she was a—a"—

"It is all right," interrupted Mr. Fenning. "Let her remain. She is what you thought, a lady."

Mrs. Mangin, however, went up to Joan, and in a hard voice, and with cast-iron features, said—

"I have little doubt that I can do what you want. My son will have business that is sure to occupy him for some time, and I cannot have him interfered with. Mr. Fenning is very good to waive his right, but in my own house I insist on such order as approves itself to my mind and to my sense of fitness. I have no idea of a 'hand' taking priority over a 'head.' I suppose your matter is a small one."

"It is so, madam."

"Well, let me manage it for you."

"It is this," said Joan, and the colour rose and then died out of her face. "Mr. Mangin has been good enough to offer a couple of tickets for an entertainment to my sister and a friend of hers, and I have come to return them, as neither can avail themselves of his courtesy."

"I can tell him that. Let me have the tickets."

"I should much prefer putting them into his hand. It seems so rude, after a civility, not to explain the refusal."

Mrs. Mangin shrugged her shoulders, then turned to Mr. Fenning and explained.

"A meeting of the Philanthropical Society comes off to-night, and my son is on the committee. There is to be a lecture on public bathing establishments and wash-houses. Statistics have been gathered as to the number of persons of the lower class who have made use of the baths. It is interesting to know to what extent the working classes appreciate cleanliness, and whether the desire for the outward application of water is on the increase among them. I have heard my son dilate on this topic. Of course it is important that those of the class whom it is desired to benefit should be induced to take an interest in the matter, to whichever sex they belong. I believe that the Philanthropical Society intends to approach the Town Council with a memorial to induce it to establish public baths; but first of all it is requisite to have statistics, plans, elevations, and estimates."

"I should hardly have supposed that tickets would have been required for admission to such a meeting," said Mr. Fenning. "Is there such avidity among the operatives of both sexes to hear statistics and consider estimates, that this is rendered imperative?"

"There is no telling," answered Mrs. Mangin, in her hard, unsympathetic voice. "This is Boxing Night; the room might on such a season be invaded by a rabble inclined to uproar, who would pass counter resolutions. It might be eminently unpleasant. My son and others who think seriously considered it advisable on this evening to provide some wholesome attraction of an improving nature that might withdraw the higher principled and right-thinking young people from the pantomime and other frivolous, not to say dangerous, entertainments of the night."

"Indeed. How good of him, and how enticing the counter-attraction offered seems to be."

"Look here," said Mrs. Mangin to Joan. "I cannot see that there is the slightest necessity for you to remain. Give me the tickets, and I will make excuses for you that shall suffice."

Joan hesitated.

"If you will allow me—they are in an envelope."

She drew forth the envelope, moistened and sealed it, then saw that she was being intently observed by Mr. Fenning.

"Perhaps you will kindly allow me," she said, still colouring in flushes, and with quivering eyelids. "I see a pen and ink on the table. I should wish to address them, and to write a few words of apology. One naturally shrinks from the semblance of ingratitude. My sister could not accept. It is not three months since our father died."

"But surely a philanthropic gathering concerning public baths is not so jocular an entertainment as to oblige you to stay away," said Mr. Fenning. "Let me look at the tickets."

"I have fastened up the envelope," answered Joan hastily.

She had by this time addressed the cover, and had written on it a few words.

The proprietor drew the envelope to him and looked intently at the penmanship. It need hardly be said that it was that of a lady.

"What is your name?" he asked. "You have signed with initials only."

Joan replied, affording him the information he desired. He repeated the name: "Frobisher! There was a Martin Frobisher, a navigator. I shall not forget it, or you."

At that moment the front door opened, and in the next Mr. Mangin entered. He started with surprise at the sight of his employer, and then looked at Joan with an expression of annoyance.

"I am really astonished to see you, sir, at this time and on such a day," said Mr. Mangin, turning to Mr. Fenning.

"Business," replied the proprietor. "I had a letter from the Rudyards, so I thought best to come over immediately. But I can wait. This lady has some communication to make to you."

"It is but this," said Joan, who had risen. She held out the envelope to him. "You were so generous as to send to my sister and Caroline Grosser cards of admission. My sister is sorry to decline; neither of us can go anywhere in our bereavement, and Caroline, like a good soul, elects to remain with my sister."

"Perhaps I can relieve you of the tickets," said Mr. Fenning, with a half-smile. He had been observing the look of alarm and confusion that had come over the face of his manager.

"I have explained," said Mrs. Mangin, "that they give admission to the Philanthropic Society conversazione or meeting, whichever it be."

"Quite so," observed Mr. Fenning. "I should much like to be there. I may be able to do a stroke of business, and secure the order for the bath fittings." He put out his hand, but Mangin tore the envelope and its contents into many pieces, and threw the fragments into the fire.

"Sir," said he, "you require no card of admission. We shall be but too proud to have you on the platform."

Joan saw that it was time for her to withdraw. She bowed respectfully to Mr. Fenning and to Mrs. Mangin, and turned to the door. As she did so the proprietor of the bank gave her a kindly nod, that seemed to convey to her a confirmation of his assurance that he would bear her in mind.

CHAPTER XXIV

TOM TREDDLEHOYLE

A FORTNIGHT after Christmas, one evening Joan was alone in No. 16—that is to say, her sister was out—when a heavy rap sounded at the entrance, and on the door being opened a coarse man with bloated face and watery eyes rolled in.

Joan retreated, and stood in the doorway of her little parlour, supposing the man to be some sot who had mistaken his way, and that she might meet with difficulty in getting rid of him. But he saluted by jerking his chin to one side and closing one eye, and said—

"Beg parding, but this is No. 16?"

"The same."

"And you're Joan Frobisher?"

"Also the same. What is there that you want of me?"

"Well, not so much I—that is—but the bairn. My lad, Tom, is ailing, and in bed, and nowt'll do with him but you must come and see him."

"Tom—what, Tom Treddlehoyle?"

"The same. He says you know all about 'im, and he leaves me no peace but I must come and tell you. Sez I to he, 'Tom, shoo won't come to sic a place as ourn!' but he sez, sez 'e, 'Cut along, old dad, and try 'er. I knows 'er, and you don't.' Well, I've come, and thou must please thysen—take or leave as thou likest. But he's bad—dreadful bad."

"Tom is ill?"

"Ay, he is so. Coughs, and don't allow his poor old dad enj'y 'is nat'ral rest."

"I will go with you, most certainly, and at once, if you will show me the way."

"Thanky, lass. I'll go afore. I'm Mister Treddlehoyle, as comed from Bairnsley in Yorkshire, originally. But I've been here most o' my time, bad luck to it. There ain't no money to be addled here."

"How long has Tom been ill?"

"Off an' on sin' Christmas. I thort at fust he were 'oarse wi' roarin' 'Christians awake! salute the 'appy morn.' But he's gone wusser and wusser."

"I am ready to attend you at once."

At the time the man was not tipsy, but he was soaked with drink, so that at such seasons as he was not intoxicated he remained in a sodden condition of half stupefaction. He had lost all firmness of flesh. His walk was a roll, and elasticity had deserted his joints.

He wheezed and laboured along beside Joan, and became confidential. He had been an admirable husband, but had lost his wife, and was a most indulgent father. He entered into, and enlarged on, his wife's funeral, the amount of cake, cheese, and ale that had been consumed at it, and the undertaker's charges.

"But," said he, with an oath, "I didn't begrudge 'er not one shilling. I've a good 'eart. It's in the right place. If only my stomick was as sound as my 'eart, I'd get along grandly. But there's my weak point, and it wants a lot of stayin' up to keep together."

The distance was inconsiderable. Mr. Treddlehoyle lived down an alley leading to a disused marlpit, into which rubbish was shot to fill it up, amidst which rubbish the children of the alley played all day, turning it over in quest of small treasures. The locality was a backwater of bad life. It was inhabited mostly by Irish, and only by men and women of the lowest character, either such as had sunk through misconduct, or such as had never striven to rise out of their native mire.

The houses were of the meanest description, and in every stage of neglect and decrepitude. They had broken windows and battered doors, bulging walls and sinking roofs. The pavement was corroded into hollows, in which filth settled, and in which infants dabbled. It was an alley comparatively still by day but a scene of witches' orgies each night, culminating in a climax of riot on the Saturday. The hour was not so late as Joan entered it that high revelry had begun. One flaring gas light illumined the place; soiled rays from lamps struggled through window-panes that were never cleaned.

The man led through an open doorway up a broken set of steps. Below, women screeched and poured forth volleys of abuse at their children, who retorted in shrieks. That human beings should endure life in such a place, and in such conditions, was to Joan amazing. Yet probably to most of the occupants of these tenements, life, as they knew it, was not without its pleasures, and life of a higher and more refined type would be incomprehensible and intolerable.

A Londoner looks on a little country village slumbering among woods and wolds and says, "Good heavens! a winter—a life—in such a place would be incredibly dull, would not, in fact, be worth living." And yet the villagers find it by no means dull, and in a thousand ways enjoyable. We can none of us understand the delights of life on any other level than our own, or in any other situation than that in which we taste them.

As Joan mounted, a woman burst from a room on the ground floor, and another pursued her, attempting to strike her with a hot flat-iron.

"They're washing," explained Mr. Treddlehoyle, turning on the stairs. "Catch 'er a crack in the jaw, Biddy Malone!" called he to one of the women below; then with an oath, "Tap her claret for her, Betsy O'Flanagan!" Next, to Joan, "There's a fine lot of entertainment to be got when the women are washing, and it don't cost nothing. There's the beauty!"

On reaching the first landing, to which Joan hurried in horror and disgust, Mr. Treddlehoyle opened a crazy door, and led into a room, the ceiling of which had in places fallen, exposing the laths, but in others had brought the laths down with it, leaving a black void.

A benzoline lamp stood on a box, and by its light Joan saw a bed, or apology for a bed, near the chimney-stack that rose through the room, without, however, having a fireplace in it.

The atmosphere of the house and room, notwithstanding abundant facilities for ventilation, was sickening, foul with the accumulated odours engendered by dirty humanity, and not at all sweetened by the exhalations of the washtubs below.

"Hah, guv'ner, I sed it! I knowed she'd come," exclaimed a husky voice from a heap of dirty and ragged blankets on the bed.

Joan took the lamp, went up to the speaker, and raising it above her head, looked down on him.

She saw little Tom, his cheeks flaming and his eyes as sparks of fire. The attempt to speak brought on a fit of coughing.

At once she took his hand. It was like a hot coal.

She laid her palm on his brow and found that it was burning.

"He is in high fever," she said. "My dear little Tom, how came this about? Have you not had your new boots?"

"Nay," said he; "the dad has drunk 'em away. He was too sharp for me. One night 'e watched me till I fell asleep, and then 'e sloped wi' my yaller boy that the gent gave me. It's been melted into gin and swallered by now."

"Hold thy gab, lad! It's nay such thing. Thou'st lost it out of thy pocket."

"I have not, daddy. Thou'st been on the booze ever since thou took it."

"Never mind about the fate of the yellow boy," said Joan, who dreaded an altercation between the fevered child and the maudlin father. She turned to Mr. Treddlehoyle and inquired whether he had sent for a doctor.

"A doctor! Not I. What's the good of a doctor? If the bairn's constitution will pull him through, no doctor is needed."

"But one ought to be called in."

"Who's to pay?"

"What is your employment?"

"I'm a thrower."

"Then I know exactly what your pay is—and out of it you can perfectly afford to have the assistance of a medical man."

"I've got no money," said the man, sitting down on his own bed, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and stretching his legs stiffly in front of him. "Doctors! nay, lass, I've no confidence in them."

"Mr. Treddlehoyle," said Joan, "the child will slip through your fingers before you are aware. He has very little constitution. He has never been given sufficient food. He is stunted, starved, neglected, and now is suffering from inflammation of the lungs."

"Oh," the maudlin wretch began to whine, "Tom! you ain't goin' to leave yer old dad, as loves yer, my pearl! the apple of my eye, and the core of my 'eart. I can't bear to be left alone. I never touched a drop o' liquor till arter my wife died, and then 'twas sorrer as shattered my nerves and upset my pore stumick. And whatever shall I do if I lose you? More by tokens," he said, and turned his pockets inside out. "How am I to bury yer respectable, and not got a penny? I'd be ashamed not to do it 'andsome."

Joan took a stool and seated herself by the bed, looking at the boy, whose lustrous eyes were fixed on her. His dirty hot face was seamed with tears. But he responded to her look with a smile.

As she studied him, it was to her as though she saw a little dainty skiff, that had left its builder's hands trim and beautiful, launched on a foul canal, where it had drifted, been buffeted against snags, bruised, stove in, and had grounded, and was sinking in the fetid slime. Or as a poor little fledgling that had fallen from its nest, was draggled, deserted, broken, crying for parental care that was denied it, and for suitable food that was beyond its reach. Or as a pale wild flower that had just opened, and was succumbing, storm-beaten, soiled, and eaten by worms.

"Is there no one to attend on him?" asked Joan of the father. "He must not be left."

"Oh, he's attended to now and then. I've asked some of the ladies below to keep an eye on him."

"Them!" in a tone of horror.

"Who else can I get?"

Again he was silent.

"He must have constant watching, and feeding every hour," said Joan.

The man rose and stumbled to the door and down the stairs. Below he fell to talking about his boy and his needs with the women engaged in washing.

Joan took the lad's hot hand. So ill, so neglected—there was little chance for him.

A chasm was in the ceiling overhead, and down streamed a current of icy air on the sickbed.

In such a place, could the child live?

There is something infinitely solemn in sitting looking on a face, and feeling that the spirit behind will soon pass away into the mystery beyond, and see what is hidden to living eyes.

"Tom," said Joan gravely, "do you know about God?"

"Just enough to swear by," he replied.

"Tom, can you pray?"

"I can cuss. That's about the beginnin' and the end of my devotional exercises — as the Methody sez."

Then the child fell to coughing.

From below surged up the roar of Mr. Treddlehoyle's voice in angry altercation, broken by the shrill treble of a woman in quarrelsome response, resenting some suggestion made by him. Then, neither being able to convince the other by argument, both burst forth in a storm of mutual vociferous recrimination charged with oaths and blasphemies.

Joan started up.

"Tom, I cannot, I will not leave you here," she exclaimed, with heaving bosom. "Will you let me take and nurse you? My dear, dear little boy."

He rose and threw his arms round her neck, laid his hot head on her bosom, and burst into tears.

Then she gathered the soiled blanket and wrapped it about him, and, huddled thus, she lifted the little fellow in her arms and staggered across the creaking floor.

At the door she met Mr. Treddlehoyle.

"What are you doing with my kid?" he asked.

"I intend to carry him home. I will take sole charge of him ; it is his only—only chance."

"You cannot carry him," said the father. "I will do that. Give me the lad."

The stout man lightly, easily bore the burden that would have been too great for Joan.

Presently the imp thrust part of his face out of the muffling blanket, and said, "Dad! She kissed me. I axed 'er for a kiss once and she deniged it. But she gave me one now unaxed. Crikey! We're marchin' along."

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE OFFICE

JOAN summoned Polly Myatt, and the girl with ready good nature agreed to help Cissie Averill with the boy during the day whilst Joan was at her work. The patient had to be made clean, with gentle care and caution; he was placed in Joan's room, as there was none other available; and she surrendered her own bed, and had one extemporised for herself on a sofa that was brought up from the parlour.

Then she made ready to go to the doctor.

"Has my sister come in?" she asked, suddenly noticing that she was still absent.

"She went up to town to change a novel at the library, and to buy some lace," said Cissie. "But—I found this scrap of paper in the grate. I did not know what it was and opened it, and found it is a note from Charlie Mangin—asking her to go to meet him at the office at half-past seven—as he has something particular to say. I don't think she ought to go."

Joan's heart stood still for a moment. She had hoped that the manager's pursuit of Sibyll had been stopped by her interference in the matter of the pantomime tickets, but clearly she had failed. What could she do to protect her sister, if Sibyll was so inconsiderate herself as to suffer communications to pass between them? She who had been most tenacious of being esteemed a lady, was ready to fling aside all the prudence and dignity that went to make up ladylike conduct.

However, she quickly recovered herself, looked at her watch, and found that there was time for her to summon the medical man, and then to reach the office, on her way back, before her sister was due there.

Sibyll assuredly would not think of complying with Mr. Mangin's request, and keeping the appointment. She had been flattered by his attention, and by the assumption of deference, such as sufficed with her to disarm suspicion.

There were periods at which, when the work pressed, the manager had to be at his office till late; and such was the case at present.

It was whispered in the bank that Mr. Mangin was paying his addresses to Miss Fenning, the daughter of the proprietor, and it was supposed that he built his hopes of being taken into partnership in the firm on his bringing the suit to a successful termination.

If this were so, then what was the meaning of his pursuit of Sibyll? Joan recognised, with a sister's pride, that Sibyll was very pretty, and this prettiness was enhanced rather than obscured by the costume adopted by the potters. Moreover, Sibyll could be very engaging in her manner. She did not usually trouble to ingratiate herself with those of her own sex; even from early childhood she had laid herself out to attract the admiration of men, and always with a success that had encouraged her in this course. To draw upon herself the observation of men, to be flattered and made much of, had finally become with her a necessity of existence. She had fallen from her social elevation; but as a change of skies does not change men's minds, neither does an altered condition of life alter the mood.

The advent of Sibyll in the pot factory had certainly provoked some heart-burning among the girls, for she had drawn the young men about her — but she disdained the "hands," and gave them no encouragement, though not repelling them. The notice of the manager, however, had been accepted greedily, as a homage that was her due.

Joan had not supposed that her sister would so far forget herself as to allow him to propose an appointment; and she could not think that Sibyll would be so lost to all sense of propriety as to accept one when sent to her.

Anyhow, it behoved her to forestall the chance of such a thing.

That Sibyll could care for the man, a man objectionable in many ways, she did not believe.

Unhappily, Sibyll had been made a great deal of by her father, and had been humoured in every way, and not corrected when supercilious or disobedient to her governess and discourteous to visitors — when these latter were of her own sex. Having been allowed to follow her own bent in times past, it was not easy to control her now, and Joan felt that she would have a task as difficult as it was delicate, to maintain Sibyll upright on the slippery ground she elected to tread.

The doctor was not within when Joan called at his surgery, and she left word for him to visit No. 16, by Fennings' bank, in Fennings' Row, as soon as he came home. Then she turned downhill, retracing her steps till she reached the pottery, when she proceeded at once to the office, where a light was burning.

As Joan threw open the swing door, "So, you are come!" exclaimed Mr. Mangin from the farther end. There was but one gas jet burning, and that was above his desk, and some obscurity lingered about the entrance. "I had hardly dared to expect you," he added, as he closed his books.

"Yes, I am come," said Joan, "and come to ask your purpose in sending such an invitation to my sister."

Mr. Mangin fell back disconcerted.

"What! You again?"

"Yes, I again stand forward in my sister's behalf, as her natural protector. I demand an explanation. If you are, as I trust, an honourable man, there is but one explanation that you can give — that you purposed asking Sibyll for her hand. Is that so?"

"You are premature," said the manager, recovering himself, and biting his lip. "One would reasonably desire to make acquaintance with a girl before committing oneself."

"And yet," exclaimed Joan passionately, "you think nothing of committing her. Could you expect her to respond to your invitation without doing so? If you have become attached to her, and she is a girl who is winsome, then know that we live in No. 16 of Fennings' Row. Call there, and we shall be pleased to see you."

"A proper proposal! I should have every window thrown open, and a head thrust out of each to observe me, and comment on my visit."

"Why not? If you mean honestly, I say why not? Then you can conduct Sibyll to Lavender Lodge to call on your mother."

"Preposterous! You!—you, a pot-hand, dictate conditions to me! An upside-down world indeed where this is the order."

"The world needs turning upside down when a man, the manager of a large business, takes advantage of his position and authority to disgrace a feeble girl in his employ."

"Fiddlesticks! I had no ulterior object. I meant no wrong."

"Is it no wrong inducing her to come to you after hours, when the establishment is almost deserted, deserted wholly save by such as are in attendance on the ovens, to seek you here in your office? This must and shall come to an end."

"Indeed! You lay down rules for me!"

"I do, although I am only a pot-hand. I will not suffer this sort of thing to proceed any further. My sister is under age, and thoughtless. I am her guardian."

"And what if I say I shall do as I choose?"

"I reply that you shall not."

"What can you do to hinder me?"

"I shall appeal directly to Mr. Fenning."

The manager stared at her stonily.

"You shall be turned out of the bank," he said savagely, after a long pause.

"Then Sibyll shall accompany me. But, mind you, Mr. Mangin, I shall not go until I have laid the whole case before Mr. Fenning. He no more desires this establishment to be a seed-bed of scandals than do you that it should be known as a nursery of leaded paralytics."

Mr. Mangin uttered an oath, turned his back on her, and seated himself at his desk. He threw open his book with an angry gesture, and began to write.

Joan waited a moment, and then, seeing that he was in no mood for further conversation, and regarded the interview as at an end, passed through the swing door and descended the steps.

Outside she was grasped by the arm, and Sibyll, in a voice quivering with anger, burst forth with—

"How dare you meddle in my affairs? You have spoiled everything."

"Sibyll! I am grieved to see you here."

"You need not. I know what I'm about. I am sick of work, sick of association with operatives. I hate it all. I had Mangin on a string, and he was ready to marry me."

"I asked him his intentions. I invited him to call on you at our house, and to take you to his mother at Lavender Lodge, and he refused point blank."

"You have no right to interfere; you are like a bull in a china shop. The man is madly in love with me."

"He is false. He has no intention whatever of marrying you. He is likely to become engaged to Miss Fenning."

"Oh, that is potbank gossip."

"It may be so; at anyrate, he declined to proceed fairly with you. I am sure, Sibyll, you do not in your heart care for him."

"I don't care for anybody, but I want to get away out of this pottery, away from the smoke and the hateful surroundings, and I am prepared to marry anyone who will make me comfortable, give me nothing to do, and allow me to spend my time in amusement. And, let me tell you, Joan, that matters have now reached a climax. I went back to No. 16 to put down some books and things I had brought, and I found that you had introduced that horrible child, that little fiend—and he in a raging fever; infectious I do not doubt, scarlet or typhoid—one or the other."

"No, he has congestion of the lungs."

"It is all the same. There is a limit even to my endurance, and I have been most forbearing. This comes on the top of your meddling in my matter with Mr. Mangin—which I am quite positive I would have brought to a successful issue. Bless me, Joan! you do not know how to lime your twigs. And now, I will stand this no longer, no, not another week. I shall look out for suitable and respectable lodgings where I can be my own mistress. I will not live in a fever hospital. I will not be walked about with leading strings. Now listen to me! Here is my ultimatum. *Imprimis:* Turn that odious little brat out of the house at once. He or I go. *Secundo:* Cease to interfere with my proceedings. Let me go unrebuked my own way. Now you know my last word. Submit to these conditions and I will stay. Refuse—and I go elsewhere next week."

CHAPTER XXVI

A SECOND FAVOUR

JOAN quitted the potbank considerably earlier than usual on the following day, in order to see to poor little Tom.

She was plunged in difficulties. The child could not be moved. His condition was critical. Not only so, but he would remain in a frail state for some time, should he recover; and when he was mending, to have to send him back to Marlpit Corner, to the squalor and destitution and cold that prevailed there, would be a consignment to relapse and death.

It was true that there was a hospital in the town, and as Joan now saw, her proper course would have been to get the boy removed to it. But she had not thought of that when she found him so ill, and she had promised the boy that she would take him to her house and nurse him. A promise was too sacred to be broken, and she felt that, having once made it, she could not go back from it.

Sibyll would listen to no explanation, hear no petition in the boy's behalf. She adhered to her resolution with stubbornness. She reiterated her determination to look out for a lodging elsewhere, in some house where there was no fever, and where she would not be under the sway of a domineering sister.

"I am really very greatly perplexed, Sibyll," Joan said; "I daresay I did wrong"—

"There is no doubt about it, you did very wrong."

"Well—I did wrong. But the poor little fellow was so ill, and his surroundings were so dreadful, that I thought of nothing but how he could be got away from them."

"Exactly—forgot me. I am accustomed to this treatment, and I resent it. You should have sent him to the hospital. What are those institutions for, and why do we subscribe to them?"

"Do you subscribe to the hospital, Sibyll?"

"You know what I mean. People who have money to spare subscribe, so as to get sick persons put away, and not be a nuisance and trouble and danger to them. If you had reported the case to the relieving officer, you would have done quite enough under the circumstances, and have a clear conscience."

"Perhaps so," answered Joan, looking dreamily down the street, "but—I did not think of it at the time; I only thought of the little boy and how miserable he was. I said to him, Will you come with me, and let me nurse you? Then he put his arms round my neck and jumped up in his bed. I don't think I could go back from what I offered; it would be dishonourable. Besides, Sibyll, just consider this. At the hospital—if he were there, he would be kept only just so long as they were able, and they would send him back to that awful place again, and all would be undone. He wants attention and good food and watching."

"Good heavens, Joan!" exclaimed her sister, "you don't mean to say you are going to keep this little horror here indefinitely? He will eat you out of house and home; convalescents are ravenous and dainty withal. Besides—I have pronounced my ultimatum." Then she walked away.

Joan was in a sad dilemma. The only way out of it that she saw was to persuade Tom to consent to be removed; and yet she shrank from proposing this to him.

Joan was greatly astonished, and not a little annoyed, on entering the parlour, to find Hector Beaudessart there, seated before the fire, looking through her photographic album.

At her entry he started up with an exclamation, put down the book, and held out both hands.

"Cousin," said he, "I have daringly invaded your queendom, disregarded all your wishes, and cast your injunctions to the winds. But I could not keep away; upon my soul, it is so! Now that I am here, laden with trespasses, let us have a talk."

She took a chair without a word. She had not recovered her astonishment; and she signed to him to be again seated.

His face was bright, his eye alight; his glossy brown hair curled about his head and rippled over his brow. He was flushed on one cheek that had been exposed to the fire.

Joan could hear little Tom coughing upstairs, and Cissie rocking her chair as she sat by him. Her back was to the window, and what light entered fell on Hector's face; a pleasant face, that of a man who could never do a mean or cruel thing, but careless and happy.

"You have a hospital here, apparently," said he lightly. "I hear that there is a sick lad overhead, down with congested lungs or pneumonia, and is being nursed, as I perceive, by an anæmic girl, whom I have seen, for she came to the door when I knocked. Another put in her appearance, with a paralysed hand. She tells me that she half belongs to this house. Can you guess what question she put to me? She said, 'Do you want to see our Joan?'"

"That is Polly, who lives next door, and is very helpful. Indeed, I do not know what I should do without her, now especially that there is this sick child here. By the way, you know him, and gave him half a sovereign for betraying where I lived."

"What, that audacious young vagabond?"

"Yes; and his father purloined the money when the boy was asleep, and drank himself drunk on it. So your gold coin ran down his throat in a stream of bad beer. Tom had purposed buying himself a pair of boots, but was unable to do so owing to his father having taken the money. Then he got a bad chill, and you hear the result."

"If he recovers he shall have boots from me, I promise you."

"If he recovers!—his condition is most precarious."

"How the dickens comes he here?"

"His father was incapable of attending to him, and he has no mother."

"So you took him?"

"It was the only chance there was for the poor little wretch."

"In some points you are like my sister Julie."

"She found her purpose in life when only thirteen; I had to wait till I was three-and-twenty to find mine."

He looked at her with a puzzled expression. Presently he said—

"Really, cousin, this is hardly a proper place for you. My mother has been distressed since I discovered where you were, and what you were doing, so that at last I undertook to brave your displeasure and go and see you. She sends me with an urgent message, an entreaty that you will leave this place."

"I cannot—any more than Julie can quit her hospital."

"Oh, she enjoys 'cases,' as she calls them. Give her a good complication, and she is in the seventh heaven."

"No, she does not enjoy them. You misread her. She can throw her whole heart into a case that makes great demands on her."

"But surely you do not mean that you are content to stay in such a place as this?"

"Quite content."

"And have no desire to leave it?"

"I cannot leave it. I have found a place in which I must be. Hitherto there has been in me a listlessness, a want of I knew not what, and now it is quite otherwise."

"And nothing will induce you to abandon it?"

"Abandon!—nothing whatever."

"And no one has any power to prevail over you?"

"No one but my landlord, who may turn me out, and then I would find another house."

"I do not understand you, I do not indeed—any more than I do my sister Julie."

"Because you do not know what she and I know. In ignorance is your bliss."

"But what of your sister Sibyll?"

Joan's hands were clasped in her lap; she compressed them, and looked down in trouble.

"How about her? Does she share your liking for this black hole?"

"No. She has a different nature from mine. Hers is one that revels only in sunshine. She is a butterfly, that folds its wings and shivers under a leaf in darkness and rain and cold. Mine is more the nature of a grub. No, I cannot say that this life suits her."

"Then," said Hector eagerly, "listen to me. Will you grant my mother this one favour? On a former occasion you unbent so far as to grant me one—to send you a hamper of holly. Now yield to my mother's entreaty, and send Cousin Sibyll to be with her." Joan looked up with a gasp.

"You have but to say 'Yes,'" proceeded Hector, "and my mother will come here and fetch her away. You do not realise how she desires it, and what a favour she would esteem it. Let me see—the day after to-morrow. It will be good of you if you show so great confidence in my mother."

"Yes," said Joan, and covered her face. She did not cry, but the tears were very near the surface, and a lump came in her throat. Her bosom was heaving like a stormy sea. "Yes, yes," she said, "I thank you a thousand times. Sibyll cannot stand this existence. She was not made for it. One must be a grub to love the mud, and she is not that—not that at all."

"It is my mother who is indebted to you," said Hector quickly; then stood up and walked irresolutely through the room.

She did not look at him, but she heard him as he paced.

Presently he stood still, took up the photographic album, ruffled through it, and set it on the table again.

"When your sister is gone, surely there will not be any necessity for you to remain and work?"

"On that day that we first met, in Littlefold Wood, and you so kindly helped me with the horse, the hounds fell on the fox and tore Reynard to pieces. Sibyll was there, and I remember her telling me and you that a butterfly was flickering over that horrible scene. It was out of place, and Sibyll is quite as truly out of place here!"

"But here there is no tragedy."

"No tragedy! Do you hear that boy coughing? Do you hear that pale girl rocking? Did you see that other cripple with her dropped wrist? These are but samples. The whole place teems with tragedies; and such a place is unsuited for a butterfly."

"And it is for you?"

"Yes. I feel that I was created to be here."

"No one will persuade you to adopt a different opinion?"

"No one."

"And no consideration—no offer made to you of a bright, a happy life?"—

She shook her head.

"I fail to understand you."

"Julie said to me, on the one occasion that I met her, and I have never forgotten her words, though then I could not understand them. She said to me, 'The apostle, when he had learned the truth, exclaimed, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel."' No, I did not comprehend her then, nor did I the meaning of St. Paul. Now, however, I do, and I say, Woe is me if I do not stick to my post here. I have found my destination. I have found my vocation. I have found my friends."

"And will you admit no others into friendship?"

"I do not say that. The more one begins to exercise sympathy, the wider one's sympathies grow. The more the heart acquires the faculty of feeling, the greater becomes its power to feel."

"Well, Cousin Joan," said the young man, and he extended his hand, "good-evening and good-bye. I must return by a night train. I have your word. My mother will come here on Monday to fetch away your sister."

He took her hand and held it for a moment, looking at her. She did not venture to raise her eyes, fearing what she might read in his, and her power of resistance to an appeal from them.

He dropped her hand with a sigh, and went out.

Joan put her hands over her face for a moment, but only for a moment, then ran upstairs to see Tom.

The doctor had been there, and would send medicine. He trusted that he would be able to pull the little fellow through—but the child demanded the closest care and constant supplies of nourishment.

Tom was sleeping in the comfortable bed, his dark hair spread on the pillow. The fiery face showed like a carnation on snow.

Joan stooped over him, and remained bowed. Cissie continued rocking. She continued in this bent condition, looking down on the boy, for some little while, partly contemplating him, partly occupied with thoughts of the interview that had taken place, and with the prospect of losing her sister.

The boy's sleep was broken by the strangling of his cough, and now and then his eyes were seen, but only to close again. The breath was very short. All at once the long-controlled tears filled Joan's eyes, and one dropped on the sufferer's cheek. He half disclosed his eyes, put up a hot hand and patted her on the face, and then sank into unconsciousness again.

Joan raised herself, and without speaking—for her heart was too full for words—descended the stairs.

Sibyll had just come in, and was in a very bad humour. She had been unable to find any lodgings that were even tolerable at the terms she offered.

"My dear," said Joan, "are you still resolved on leaving me?"

"I am not going to live in a fever hospital."

"You shall leave the day after to-morrow."

"Whither?"

"For Pendabury. Mr. Beaudessart has been here with a message from his mother about you, that you will pay her a visit and remain with her indefinitely."

"Joy!" exclaimed the girl, her sulks falling off like a wet dropped waterproof. "The thing of all others to suit me. What about yourself?"

"I, of course, remain here."

"I see no 'of course' in it."

"We cannot both burden Mrs. Beaudessart."

"Oh! as to burden, my dear Joan, I shall bring life and light into the house. Trust me, I shall turn Mr. Beaudessart round my finger. Take my word for it, if I set my foot again in Pendabury, I shall never leave it. The old woman can be packed off to Rosewood. I bet you a ten-button pair of gloves that, before a twelvemonth is out, I shall have made him marry me."

Joan looked at her sister in some amazement, and not a little distress. Presently, with a sigh, she said, "Well, perhaps it would be for the best."

"There can be no perhaps in the case. Trust me. I know the weak side of men. I shall manage it, and become queen of Pendabury."

CHAPTER XXVII

NO GARDEN

JOAN sat up with little Tom till three in the morning, when she was relieved by Cissie. He had to be fed at intervals of half an hour with beef tea, and given his medicine periodically.

Had she not been sitting up, she could not have slept, owing to the noise in the adjoining house, that commenced at eleven, when Mr. Myatt returned to his family from the public-house in a hilarious condition.

The disturbance began at the moment when he tottered over the threshold, where he was met full face by a volley of reproaches from his wife, which he attempted to silence by butting at her with his bald head.

Then ensued a heated altercation upon the stairs, which he surmounted with difficulty and not without lapses, as his wife preceded him, retreating backwards, lashing at him with her tongue, and slapping at his bald pate with her hands, whilst Polly harassed his rear by dragging at his coat tails.

In time, by sheer weight and force, he succeeded in reaching the landing, where, taking advantage of the obfuscation of his mind, wife and daughter succeeded in inveigling him into Polly's room, and turning the key on him from the outside. Once within, however, the Myatt *père* awoke to the fact that he had been trapped, and rained kicks and blows with his fist on the door.

As these proved ineffectual, he next projected his person against the valve, and with a crash came out again on the landing. Whether he had actually burst the door from its hinges, or whether, fearing destruction of property, Mrs. Myatt had, at the supreme moment, unfastened the door, Joan was unable to decide.

Whichever way he obtained his liberation, the result was only reached by his prostration on the floor of the landing.

From this position Mr. Myatt succeeded in raising himself to a sitting posture, from which, like a howitzer, he discharged oaths and profanities at the heads of his wife and daughter, to which they replied with expletives in high-pitched tones.

This continued for many minutes, till it occurred to the gentleman to rise to his feet, which he did with considerable difficulty, and then, in despite of protest, entered his own sleeping apartment, which adjoined that of Joan, divided from it, as we know, by a single brick partition. When once there she heard every movement and every word with such distinctness, that Joan felt almost as if she were an eye-witness to the domestic broil.

Arrived in his own bedroom, Mr. Myatt, in the first place, proceeded to stretch himself and yawn vociferously, and then to get into bed with his boots on, and in a position the reverse of that usual, and to cross his feet with a grunt of satisfaction on the pillow.

Apparently the passionate longing of his soul was for sleep, and the efforts of his wife, ably seconded by his daughter, were directed towards making him do so in the approved position.

Thereupon ensued a momentary lull, during which Mrs. and Miss Myatt by signs concerted a surprise attack, and then, suddenly, the two precipitated themselves on his feet, and each laying hold of a leg, by a back rush carried him off the bed, and he fell on to the floor with a bump that shook the whole habitation and that adjoining it.

The storm now waxed more furious. To his deep bellows responded the shrill invectives of his wife and daughter. Joan caught her own name repeatedly employed, together with "shame," so that she discovered that she was being employed as a projectile to humble the common enemy. The resistance of Mr. Myatt became for a while weaker, as in being drawn off the bed he had apparently dragged blanket and coverlet along with him, and had involved himself in these wraps, which, getting at one moment about his head, muffled his voice, and at another about his feet, impeded action, and continuously engaged his hands in attempts to extricate himself.

Thus the contest proceeded, the fortunes alternating, till about two in the morning, when Mr. Myatt gained a complete triumph, in that he succeeded in expelling the women from his room, shutting them out, and fastening the door upon them, by dragging a chest of drawers against it. After that he flung himself with a crash upon the bed, and blew a flourish of victorious snorts.

During the progress of the conflict, Joan had repeatedly looked at the sick boy, in fear lest the riot should disturb his sleep, but he slumbered on in unconsciousness of the turmoil, to the like of which he was habituated.

In the morning, when Joan rose, Sibyll was still in bed. The day was Sunday. Had it been a common week-day, she would not have gone to work, for the necessity for so doing was at an end.

When Joan returned from church, she found that Sibyll had just risen—she was in high spirits at her approaching liberation, and much disposed to enlarge on the annoyance caused during the night by the disturbance in the adjoining house, for which she seemed, in a degree, to hold Joan responsible, because the Myatts were her friends.

The boy Tom was better. The surgeon came and pronounced favourably.

Presently Polly looked in, and beckoned to Joan that she wished to speak with her in private. Joan at once went into the street with her.

"It's about father," explained the girl. "He's as meek and lowly as you could desire, and has a bump as big as a goose's egg on his head. It's a real pleasure to 'ave 'im break out now and again, he is so placable and sweet after it, and he's promised mother a new bonnet and me a parasol lined with rose colour. Think of that! Father wants terrible bad to speak with you. He's a bit shy coming round to No. 16, and I don't think he could get his hat to sit on his head with that potato of a lump on it—and all blue, moreover. If you wouldn't mind stepping in?"

"Not in the least," said Joan, and she followed Polly into the Myatt residence.

Mr. Myatt sat by the fire in the front kitchen, that was also a parlour. His wife was engaged in the rear, and thither to assist in the preparation of the Sunday dinner Polly also went. It was understood that the father desired to eat his humble pie, and objected to doing so in the presence of his wife and daughter.

"How do you do?" was his salutation. "A fine morning for the season of the year"—there was falling rain mingled with sleet—"very glad to have a little talk with you. I had a small difference with my wife last night, and I daresay we both raised our voices, and continued the argiment till late—which I'm sorry for, as it may have disturbed your rest. But it shan't 'appen again. You see, I was at the Blue Boar last evening, and we was engaged in a political discussion, and that 'eated our blood, and when I came home I wanted to continue it with the missus."

"I'll bring you down the pillow, and show you what he have done to that with his boots," said Mrs. Myatt, opening the kitchen door and thrusting in her head. She was, however, at once withdrawn by Polly's hand laid on her shoulder. Then the door was again shut.

"I was trying to demonstrate the political situation by drawing a diagram on the pillow cover," explained Mr. Myatt; "but, bless you! some women have no heads for politics, and social economy is Chinese to 'em. But it shan't 'appen again. Knowing as I now does the limited range of her interlects, I won't try to argy with my wife any more."

"Now look here!" Mrs. Myatt's head again appeared. "Wot's all that about my range? It's a good range, and your dinner'll be cooked on it. You won't put in another under eight pound, and it's the landlord as ort to do it—not you." Again Mrs. Myatt's head was withdrawn compulsorily.

"We were thrashing out the great question of capital and labour," said Mr. Myatt. "Let us take the case of competition among workers — lowering the wages."

"Oh, if you please, Mr. Myatt, I am quite incompetent to understand theories—I like to devote my attention to practice," said Joan.

"Ah!" said Mr. Myatt, "women, I daresay, never can be got to interest themselves in the great questions of the day. I can't say myself that I was much taken up with political and social economy till I came to live in Fennings' Row. Formerly I was up over the hill and had a nice little bit of a garden, and I was tremenjious took up with that. Now it's a lovely and an entertaining pursuit of a night to go out a-slugging with a pail of soapy water. Lord! I've had the pleasure of gathering as many as a hundred and twenty of an evening, and some of 'em woppers. And then to put cabbage leaves and a bit of turnip, and see how they come under and over them. Bless you! it lifted up the heart of a man and made him 'appy. Couldn't fail to do so. What with sowing seed, and watering, and weeding, and, above all, slugging, at that time I'd no thought for political economy and the Blue Boar. But that was too far from my work, and I 'ad to give it up and come down 'ere. And 'ere the slugs have it all their own way, except as, bless your soul! I never saw any green thing grown as they could eat, so what they come for here I can't guess. If one can't go after slugs, one must be down on capitalists—and I'm arter them now. Well, I tell you, I respects you greatly, and as to my Polly—Lord! if a dozen policemen were pursuing you to captivate you, she'd never allow one near you—though she's got but one hand good for much. And missus, with her temper and tongue"—

"Now, Peter!"

Mrs. Myatt's head and shoulders reappeared, and were as rapidly withdrawn.

"Well, give me your hand. Say you'll overlook it this once if I wor on the political rampage last night. I respects you tremenjious."

CHAPTER XXVIII

POTTERS' ROT

AS Joan left the pottery at noon on Monday, it was with the intention of not returning to her work in the afternoon, that she might see Mrs. Beaudessart, and say farewell to her sister.

She hardly expected the lady to arrive early, and in the morning there was no need for her to remain away from the bank, for Sibyll was able herself to do her packing, and the sick boy would be attended to by two willing helps, Polly and Cissie.

Moreover, she was about to lose her sister's earnings, which, though inconsiderable, were of some assistance towards the housekeeping, and Joan foresaw that she would require every penny she was able to scrape together to maintain her little establishment. It was true that there was a small reserve fund that resulted from the sale of the furniture, etc., at Pendabury, but there had been nothing recovered from the bank, after the expenses of her father's funeral had been discharged; and what had been overdrawn for the sake of his rash speculations, she had been obliged to refund from the money obtained by the sale.

She was resolved to set aside for her sister the major portion of the sum at her disposal. It would not be reasonable to expect that the Beaudessarts, though taking her into their house, should find her in clothing and pocket-money. It was probable that they would do this, but she had no right to reckon on it.

For herself she was confident. She knew her own powers and skill. She was rapidly mastering the difficulties of the art of painting on porcelain, and all she would shortly require would be an opening for doing work that would be remunerative on a higher scale than the mere mechanical drudgery to which she was at present tied down. She could not hope for promotion from Mr. Mangin, but if she was not advanced at Fennings' bank, in course of time, she would endeavour to obtain work in another.

She had no thought of appealing to the proprietor, although he had promised to keep his eye on her, and the look he had given her as she left the sitting-room of Lavender Lodge had been encouraging.

For the sake of her sister, to protect her, she would have done this; but for herself, she preferred to be independent. Mr. Fenning was, as she could judge from his countenance, a plain, straightforward, and right-feeling man, a man to be depended upon, who, when he said a thing, said it with the intention of following up his words by action; but it would be a serious step to appeal to the head of the firm against the manager, and this she certainly would not do about such a matter as her own advancement.

As Joan left the potbank, she saw a pale, worn woman of middle age, who followed her. At first she made no account of this. The woman was but one of the hands of Fennings' or some other bank, leaving work and returning home for her midday meal, or going to one of the eating-houses, where, for a reasonable sum, it was possible to obtain a good dinner, should the distance of residence from the bank make a return home inconvenient.

But when she arrived at No. 16, she saw the same woman hanging behind, with a look as though she would like to speak to her.

Joan was, however, hurried by observing a cab standing before her door, with Sibyll's box on the roof, and this distracted her attention from her follower.

Mrs. Beaudessart had arrived at an earlier hour than had been anticipated by Joan, and Joan hastened to enter No. 16, and meet the lady, and clasp her hands and express thanks for her goodness to Sibyll.

"Not at all," said Mrs. Beaudessart. "It is you who are conferring a favour on me, and that one by no means inconsiderable. Do not be anxious about your sister. I will take the utmost care of her, and see to her interests, and concern myself with her future."

Sibyll, who was in the room, looked roguishly out of the corners of her eyes at Joan, and pursed her lips, and put just the point of her tongue to her cheek—telling her as plainly as if she had spoken, that she, Sibyll herself, purposed concerning herself about her own future.

Then the girl ran upstairs to cast her eye about the bedroom and assure herself that nothing had been left behind.

"I know you are good," said Joan to Mrs. Beaudessart; "I have been too proud and self-reliant hitherto. I have broken down with regard to my sister. She is not suited for a life that agrees with me. I had found this out, and was lost in perplexity what to do when your kind offer reached me."

The white-haired lady kissed Joan affectionately. "You see," she said, "Julie is away, so I am very solitary. I could not retain her with me. She is boiling over with energy, and would eat her heart out if not given a wide sphere for work. Sibyll, accordingly, is just the one person I want as a bright and delightful companion and a comfort to me. And now—we have not much time to spare, as I want to be at Pendabury early. Run after your sister—she is in her room—and say good-bye."

Joan ascended, and found Sibyll before the glass.

"Oh, Joan!" said the girl, "Mr. Beaudessart perhaps ought to have come here and helped his mother to get me off. However, it is just as well—I should not have relished his seeing me in such quarters as Fennings' Row, and with such associates as Cissie and Polly, as also with a dirty little vagabond coughing under the same roof. Oh, Joan! when will you leave this odious place? Mind you, when I am mistress of Pendabury,"—she dropped her voice,—"as I mean to be, I will not have it said of me that my sister is a common factory girl. I shall be restive at Pendabury thinking of you here in this grubby hole."

"Julie is a common nurse."

"That is a different matter. Ladies by birth go out as hospital nurses. It is quite fashionable. But I never heard of a lady going to work in a pot-bank."

"I wish fervently I were not the only one."

"What would be the good of them coming among a lot of common women?"

"I would have them bring to the common women, as you call them, what they want: some of the light from above, the culture, self-restraint, and, above all, the sympathy that they so greatly need."

"We won't talk of that now. I am off, out of the brick-kilns of Egypt and away from its task-masters, and can do no other than sing my 'In exitu Israel.'"

. . . .

Joan saw her sister off. Several of the girls were in the street; they had heard that the younger of the Frobishers was leaving, and a cab standing at a door in that thoroughfare was, in itself, a novelty sufficient to attract attention.

Joan waved her kerchief to Sibyll till the cab rounded the corner of Fennings' bank and was lost to sight. Then she turned, to find the wan woman hanging about her door.

Still occupied with the loss of her sister, Joan hardly accorded the poor creature any attention. The deprivation of her sister's company would leave her much alone; she would have no one with her now who was part of her past, and with whom she could look back into the sunshine of old Pendabury life. Although she knew it was the best thing that could happen to Sibyll, yet she keenly felt the pang of parting with her.

She put a kerchief to her eyes for a minute on entering the house, and sat wrapped in her meditations, till, all at once, she roused herself with the question—

"What can that woman want with me?"

At once she went forth to see if the poor creature were still there, or had departed.

She saw her, and the woman advanced the moment that Joan accorded her a look of encouragement.

"Is there anything that you require?" asked the girl, in a kindly tone.

"May I have one little word with you?" entreated the woman; and Joan noticed that she laboured in her breathing.

"Come within, and sit down."

The woman followed as Joan led the way, and took a seat pointed out to her. She was obviously in miserable health.

"It's a great piece of boldness," said she, "but I could find no rest till I made up my mind to ask it."

"Ask boldly; I can but refuse," answered Joan, in her pleasant, musical tones. "Be sure, however, of this, that I shall refuse you nothing which by any possibility I can grant, and then only with a sore heart. I see that you are suffering."

"I have the potters' rot," said the woman, putting her hand to her bosom. "It is here—the dust. I cannot any longer work in the bank. I cough—and when I cough it unsteadies my hand at the smoothing; so they have sacked me."

"Have you been long ill?"

"It has come on by degrees. I knew it would arrive at this. It can't be helped. The ware must be smoothed, and someone must do it—and then the dust gets into the lungs, and, little by little, lines and chokes the air passages. It's like the boilers; they get coated and crusted up in time, but a chap can get inside a boiler and chip out what is set there. It's like the chimbleys that get stuffed up with soot, but they can set a sweep with a brush to clear them out. No doctor can get with a chisel and hammer into my lungs and chip out the clay as is formed there, and no brush will sweep out the dust as is lodged there. So the pipes get thickened and stuffed up till no more air can pass through them, and that is potters' rot. It is a bit of asthma, and a bit of bronchitis, and a bit of consumption mixed together in about equal parts."

"But can nothing be done for you—nothing at all?"

"They do say that fresh country air would be a gain—but nothing will clear the flint and clay out of my lungs, when lodged there. Do you mind if I tell you about myself?"

"I shall be glad to hear."

"No, it won't make you glad—not if you are what I take you to be, and what folks tell of you. My husband was a placer, and he had to lift the saggers and pile them. Some he carried up a ladder, and they are heavy; you'd wonder if you had the lifting of 'em. Well, it requires a stiff man with stout arms, and he was that. I never saw a stiffer man than he. But one day he hurted his back, got a sprain or a twist—he himself never knew exactly how it came about and what it was. One doctor said one thing, and one another, but none did him any good. Perhaps he broke a cord, or got a kink in a muscle, I can't say; but from that time he steadily wasted away. My son, and daughter, and I worked to support him and pay the doctor's bills, but, Lord bless you! no doctors could do him any good; yet it was a satisfaction to have them come and examine him and prescribe, and folks 'ud have talked if we hadn't had plenty o' useless advice. So he went, and then my gal, she went also."

"Went—died?"

"No, I can't say that. She was wayward, and wouldn't stand speaking to; and when I complained of some of her goings on, and staying out so late of a night, she left me in a temper, and I've not seen her more. And the boy—he was a fine lad, and stuck to his mother. But he got a chill. He was a clayer, and was much in the damp, mixing the clays, and in a draughty place, and it settled on his chest, and he went off in a decline. They said he ought to have been taken into the country—but, Lord! how was I to do that? Well, I buried him. Not a penny help did I get from my daughter, but I don't know where she went, and what became of her."

The poor creature looked at Joan and saw by the working of her face that what she said had met with a response.

"I was left alone," she said, pursuing her life-story. "And it has been a solitary time with me for some years. No 'usband, no daughter, no son, nothing and no one to live for and love. But I held on till my lungs got clayed up, and now I'm turned away. I've got a mite of savings, though; look here!"

She opened a bag and produced coin, a few pieces of gold, one five-pound note, and some silver.

"There," said she. "I've put that by, but I can earn no more. And now, what I have come here to ask of you is this: Will you take me in? I've been told as how your sister were leaving you. They've been talking about it up and down the street all Sunday. So I know you have a room to spare. I am ready to pay for my lodgings and meat as long as this here money lasts."

"But what when it is expended?"

"Then there's nothing else for me but just to go into the canal."

CHAPTER XXIX

"HE WENT AWAY SORROWFUL, HAVING GREAT POSSESSIONS"

"I WILL take you," said Joan.

If the woman would have thanked she could not, owing to an interruption. Hector Beaudessart entered, and the woman, with tact, withdrew to collect her goods and bring them to No. 16.

"What," exclaimed Joan, "you here! And not with your mother!"

"I cannot leave you without another attempt to induce you to come to Pendabury. Joan, come with me. I want you. I feel that I cannot do without you. You do not know how I love you. You fill all my heart and mind."

"You are my dear cousin, Hector," answered Joan, with a tremor of her lip and a quiver in her voice. "I feel your kindness, but—allow me to be frank with you—I am sure that we could not be happy together, so long as our views of what is before us are so divergent. You look forward to a life without care, full of harmless pleasures—hunting, shooting, fishing, filling your greenhouses with choice exotics, reading an occasional novel, and so passing your existence—perhaps half a century—without blemish. I had no other idea for my future till my father died, and then I was brought face to face with some stern actualities, of which I may have heard, but to which I gave no heed. Look at Pendabury, Hector, with all its loveliness and its luxury, enjoyed by not half a dozen persons; then turn your eyes on this pottery district, with its teeming thousands pent up in sordid streets and narrow habitations under a dingy sky, and with nothing to look on to make life lovely. Do you think this is just?"

"My dear cousin, you have become a socialist?"

"No, I have not. Socialism is bred of a realisation of the agonies of life resultant from modern civilisation, which converts men and women not into machines, but into parts, members, of a machine which takes the young of both sexes, kills all initiative out of them, and mechanises them till it has used them up, body, mind, and soul, and then casts them aside as so much refuse. The socialist sees all this, it grieves him to the heart, and he proposes desperate remedies, crude and impracticable. He has seen no more than one side of every question, and he would undo all that centuries have done to build up the great fabric of European greatness. The socialist's heart aches, and he cries out at the suffering which everywhere surrounds him; but his suggested remedies would make existence insufferable, and, if carried out, could not last a generation. I believe in no isms. Every ism is a half truth. May I tell you my thoughts? My brain has been working while my heart has been quivering since I came here, and I am full of ideas—whether practicable or not I cannot say."

"Speak your mind and open your heart, Joan. In me you will find a ready listener."

"Well, Hector, there are thousands upon thousands in the manufacturing portions of England that are being used as blind tools for the production of certain indispensable articles—indispensable to our modern civilisation, and which the world will never do without. But the manufacture is stunting to the faculties of mind and soul, where not injurious to the body. It is destructive of all true enjoyment of life, and I take it God created every creature to be happy. Many of the workers are aware of this, and resent it; others jog on, crushed by a blind fatalism that forbids hope of escape. Possibly, some day, the masses may burst forth in revolt against the system, as the Sicilian slaves rose in the Servile war of Italy. They may be put down, as were the serfs of old, decimated and enchained afresh. They may compass their emancipation, and attempt to realise their wild dreams and carry out their undigested plans, and in so doing will wreck modern civilisation and destroy culture past recovery, and leave Europe open to invasion by some nation that advances automatically stage by stage and not by wholesale revolution. It appears to me that we have in England, in our body of operatives, men and women, a magnificent material, incomparably superior to any that exists elsewhere on the face of the earth. It possesses a healthy heart, full of honesty, generosity of feeling, heroic perseverance, and a touching tenderness of soul. But the class has its defects, which sadly mar its greatness. It lacks self-restraint. Its members act upon impulse, sometimes blind, sometimes intelligent. The father drinks himself drunk because he cannot restrain himself when in company with his mates; the wife scolds on the smallest provocation, and never knows when to bridle her nagging tongue, because her temper is under no control. The children cast aside their obligations to their parents when these latter attempt to cross their wills. The father and mother hold their offspring in check, not by example but by the stick, and when the children grow beyond the dread of a beating they no longer respect their parents. I have heard a mother say of her daughter, 'If she goes wrong it won't be for want of my wopping her!'—that is about typical of the way in which a multitude of the working class regard education. Where there is not undue severity there is over-indulgence, and the young grow up under either system self-willed and undisciplined. Of course there are exceptions, but exceptions prove the rule." Joan paused a moment, then she went on: "Now we have in our upper classes, in our country parsonages and manor houses, in town mansion and suburban villa, among our gentry generally, the very finest material in the world for infusing into the working classes that very element which it lacks. Every gentleman's house, great or small, is a reservoir of healthy, health-giving self-control. Look at our young men and girls of the upper classes—where can you find their equals? Pure-minded, high-principled, full of courage and sense of honour and fair play. The whole fabric of culture among the classes is based on self-discipline. From earliest childhood boy and girl have it impressed on them that to be gentlemen and ladies they must keep themselves under restraint. It begins before they learn A B C. Courtesy is impressed on the very babe when taught to say 'Ta!' on receiving a bit of cake. The whole of our public school excellence depends on the inculcation of self-government. Among the classes, this teaching of self-control may not always be due to high principle; it may be merely owing to the fact that it is demanded by cultured society, and that such as do not possess it are kicked out. To what do our young men devote themselves? The youth born with a gold spoon in his mouth idles life away usually in harmless amusements, in some cases he sinks into dissipation. Of those without gold or silver spoons, most go to the Colonies, to ranches, or into the army or navy, and do good work wherever they go. It is they who have made the name of an Englishman proverbial with truth, justice, and humanity. Why does not some of this wholesome blood come down here—come and flow in these dark places of our native land?"

"What, Joan! have our gentlemen turn mechanics, and work in mine and factory?"

"Yes, Hector, why not? It will repay them a thousand times any little shock to old habits, any abandonment of old comforts. They will learn to know their brothers who toil that others may enjoy. The true huntsman cares for his hound and horse, and sees that they are well groomed, well housed, and well fed. The true gentleman should see that his fellow-men, who make his boots and weave the cloth of his coat, who grind his knives, turn his gun, make his cups and plates, his wineglasses and decanters, are treated as human beings and cared for as living souls."

"But, Joan, what can we do? How can we alter the whole condition of manufacturing life?"

"You can do a great deal by going among the people, living with them, working side by side with them. You would get to know, esteem, ay, and reverence them, the workers; and the workers would derive from you some of that high culture, that self-discipline, which has become, by a process that has gone on for centuries, the groundwork and the essence of high-class life."

"You think, Joan, that we shall see an upheaval of the working classes, and that the only way to stave this off is for us to fuse ourselves with them?"

Joan flushed crimson.

"Hector!" she said. "I would not for the world have you or any gentleman go down among the artisans and work, merely to save your class. All work that is worth account, all work that will lead to results that will be productive and last, must spring from a better motive than that—the love of God and of our fellow-men—our brothers and sisters, Hector, never forget that—our poor, toiling, overworked, ill-used brothers and sisters. Dear Sibyll said to me, 'I cannot bear to be at Pendabury and think of you here.' That is what I would have every man born with a gold or silver spoon in his mouth say, 'I cannot bear to live in ease, idleness, and luxury, and to have my poor brothers and sisters lapping up broth, like a dog.'"

"My dear cousin—you strain a case. I have learned, for I have been at some trouble to make inquiries, that the men who have the hardest work get the best pay. And as to lapping up their broth

—why, I have been assured that some of the colliers and artisans, when flush of money, will indulge in champagne, eat their oysters when at three shillings a dozen, and buy strawberries at a penny apiece."

"That may be so. But why? Because they know not how else to get rid of their money. They are brutalised. No higher way of enjoyment has been shown them than that of their animal appetites. Pay them eight, ten, fifteen shillings a day; they will squander it on luxuries, on the best of tipples, and the best tobaccos, and the daintiest of meat, and what they cannot spend, this they will throw away in bets. They have not been shown that man does not live only on the meat that perishes. That is precisely why I want some of you young men, some with fine prospects and some without, but with the reserve fund of your early education, you young men bred in an atmosphere of fine culture, to come among these people and show them the higher way. You are ready enough to endure privation and roughness for a bit of shooting in Central Africa or in the Rocky Mountains, why not for some higher purpose than the killing of wild beasts? Mind you, such an act of self-sacrifice will bring to you enormous compensations, if you are what I hold you to be. You will learn to know human nature, you will meet with reward, and, I doubt not, win love—only, for God's sake, do not undertake it merely to save your class."

"But, Joan, there are the clergy and doctors, who move among them, and there are Sisters of Mercy and district visitors as well. Surely they fulfil your requirements."

"No, they do not, for they are not of the people. Their professions, their very dress, differentiate them. If you want to raise the masses, and at the same time to steep yourself in a knowledge of human nature, and of the needs and desires of Lazarus, you must strip off your purple and lie down at his side. Hector! Do you recall some careless words that fell from you, the very first time we met, and which formed almost your first sentence? You said to me, 'Wherever an English gentleman sees need, perplexity, distress, thither he flies with an eager heart to assist.' The great Master of all, who worked the transformation of society, He did not become a high priest or a ruler of the Sanhedrim when He sought man's regeneration; but He made Himself of no reputation, and took on Him the form of a servant. And now, you must excuse me. I have little Tom Treddlehoyle to look after, and to relieve Cissie. I must go, but I trust I have made clear to you why I cannot accept your offer. We could not be happy together, for we look at life with different eyes."

She put out her hand to him, and he took it, but turned his head away. Then she departed.

Against the wall hung a picture. It was an engraving from the painting by Watts of the young man who went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. A wonderful picture, telling so deep a story so simply.

Hector, left alone, walked across the room and stationed himself before this picture. He stood there immovable for full ten minutes, and his breath came in long inhalations.

He heard Joan speaking in a cheery voice to the sick lad upstairs. He heard Cissie laughing as she descended the steps.

Then he heaved a sigh, and went away sorrowful.

CHAPTER XXX

BUT RETURNED

THREE days later Hector Beaudessart was again at No. 16 Fennings' Row. He went there after work hours had concluded, in the expectation of finding Joan at home. She was, however, out, but Polly Myatt was in the house, so also was Cissie.

Tom Treddlehoyle was mending. He was sufficiently improved to be transferred for a few hours downstairs, and now, muffled in blankets, he reclined in an easy-chair by the fire.

His rags had been burnt, and Joan had actually gone into the town to buy a new suit for him. She was able, pretty accurately, to judge his size, and allow somewhat for growth. Probably she would be suffered by the shopman to take home with her two or three sets of garments on approval.

The little fellow was ivory white and clean. His hair had been combed and brushed. Much of his coarseness had gone with the grime, and the wan face was not deficient in delicacy of feature, and showed capacity for refinement under proper training. The roguish eyes had not lost their twinkle and the flexible lips their curl for a laugh.

The lamp was alight when Hector entered, and the fire was burning with a ruddy glow, suffusing the little room with light, colour, and warmth.

Polly looked the young man over as he entered, with an unfriendly expression. She stood in front of him with arms akimbo, and said—

"You want our Joan, I suppose?"

"Yes, frankly, I do."

"Then you ain't a-going to get her," said Polly. "You've been here three or four times, and you've been seen flutterin' about in the neighbourhood, and we don't approve of hangers-on. We don't intend to let her go. We want to keep her here, and she belongs by rights to us."

"She's my Joan," threw in the boy from his blankets. "You've come too late, young cove. I took 'er on from the fust."

"Come here, Cissie," said Polly, throwing open the door into the back kitchen, "and you, Mrs. Mardentle, as well. You come and cast your eye over this here young man. He's come after our Joan. I'm sneeped wi' him. He may want her, but he shan't have her."

"We can't do wi'out her," said Cissie.

"You have a mind to carry her off," said the woman with potters' rot, whose name was Mardentle. "If you do manage it, then there'll be no place left for me but the canal."

Then in came Caroline Grosser.

"Carrie," said Polly Myatt, "here's a fine courtier come to take away our Joan. There is a lady 'as been and carried off Sibyll in a cab. She's not such a terrible loss; we shan't cry our eyes out for the want of her. But it's another matter altogether with our Joan."

"I'll blacken his peepers," said Carrie, "if he do but name it."

"There be a lot of our girls coming in by and by," said Polly, "and, bless my bones! if you don't partic'lar feel flush of cash and value the suit you're in—not to say your own self behind it—you won't let 'em get an inkling as to what is in your mind. Now," pursued Polly, "that coat of yourn. I don't suppose it cost you a penny under eighteen shillings, and as to them trousers, I've seen the like of they, hung up outside Moses Solomon's clothing shop, with a ticket on 'em, 'Our Prime Pants—Fourteen and Eleven.' That makes thirty-two and eleven. If you don't want to be resuited, you'll keep out of the way of our girls, when they know you're wanting to walk off with our Joan." Polly strode up and down the room, tossing her red head. "What 'ud No. 16 be without her? What 'ud Fennings' Row, not to name the other side of the street? What 'ud become of father? He'd be politicianing again at the Blue Boar, and mother'd be lively wi' her tongue. It's no good your thinking of it, young chap! We 'ave all to be consulted in the disposing of her, for she's Our Joan."

"Well," said Hector, laughing, "I am not brave enough to encounter a regiment of Staffordshire Amazons—I shall decamp."

Hector did leave the house, but walked to the head of the street and waited there for Joan. He had no intention of being driven off the field without an effort to obtain a foothold.

He had not long to tarry before he saw her coming along with springing tread from the town. The gas-lamp threw its light full on her as she approached, and he saw that she carried a bundle.

"Cousin Joan!" said he, stepping forward, "I have come back."

She was a little startled, as she had not noticed him in the shadow immediately under the lamp. But she soon rallied, and answered, "You are pertinacious, Cousin Hector. But it is quite in vain."

"Joan dearest, hearken to what I have to say. As you will not come to me, I am going to you."

"What do you mean?"

"I intend following your advice and entering the works."

"You are not in earnest?"

"I am. You shall hear where I have been, and what I have done. I took a trap at the Griffin and drove out to the Fennings' place. I have seen the old gentleman. I like him. He is straightforward and honest. I told him plainly what I was, what I wanted, and why I desired it."

"Well?"

"He was amused at first—thought I was trifling; but I spoke out decidedly. And, Joan — I used your name, and he smiled, and said he had not forgotten you. He let me understand that you had been serviceable to him in giving him a glimpse into the character of a certain manager he had."

"Yes, Mr. Mangin."

"Who might possibly have become his son-in-law, but who is now not only very certainly not to be taken into the family, but who will be turned out of his management."

"From what I know — that is, have heard—it is as well that it should be so."

"Mr. Fenning has made inquiries, and is satisfied that this man Mangin is not a suitable person to be employed by him. He first entertained a suspicion to this effect from something he heard through you."

"Well, never mind Mr. Mangin. How about yourself?"

"Joan, I have been considering a good deal what you said. I daresay that when I dished up your opinions before Mr. Fenning, I made a hash of them. However, he did not object. He is willing to let me make a trial. I do not think he has much faith in me—but he knows about you, Joan. If his inquiries have served to shake his confidence in Mangin, they have caused him to form a very high opinion of you—and I really believe he would do anything you recommended or asked."

"You are going into our bank?"

"Yes, Joan."

"But — it cannot be. It must not be, Hector. You have duties that hold you to Pendabury."

"They shall not be neglected."

"Indeed, my lengthy diatribe the other day was not levelled against you. Indeed no!"

"Joan, I want to know both what the artisan is and what are his merits and what his demerits. His merits will serve to deepen and strengthen my character, at the same time that my knowledge of men grows and my sympathies expand. My culture may possibly help in the rectification of some of his twists and the making up of some of his deficiencies. Anyhow, I feel that I must know him, and get him to know me. The masses, I daresay, think that we of the classes are a set of pampered, enervated, dissolute, and heartless fools. I daresay it will do the man of the masses some good to look me eye to eye, and see that one has a heart, courage, and does not live only for the pleasures that perish. He who has seen you, knows what a lady is and can be wherever placed; and let him know that an English gentleman can be a gentleman everywhere and among all kinds of men. I do not doubt that, when we come to know each other intimately, we shall acquire a respect and a liking for each other. We shall melt into one another imperceptibly, sloughing off what is feeble and ephemeral and absurd, and intensifying every element that is good. See, Joan! I talk almost like you."

"Hector, in your case this will not do."

"Why not?"

"You have your duties at Pendabury."

"You have said that already."

"My dear father," said Joan—"I regret to say it, but you have probably by this time discovered the fact—neglected repairs in the farms and cottages. At the time I did not understand his indifference. It was occasioned by this—that he had a life-interest only in the estate; and as the place was to pass away from his children after his death, he really did not care to put himself to the expense of making the farmhouses sound and the cottages habitable. He cut down timber, but did no planting. A good deal of the land cries out to be drained, and is overgrown with rushes.

Now you come into a wide stretch of property covered with ruins. The farmhouses and appurtenances must be rebuilt or repaired, or the farmer will quit. The labourers must be given habitations comfortable and sufficiently roomy to enable them to rear families in decency. This, then, must claim your attention. The land must be looked to, and drainage must be taken in hand on a systematic and extensive scale. Therefore I say, your place is at Pendabury."

"That need not engage all my time. Come and help me."

"What! to build farmhouses and cottages, drain and plant and hedge? No."

"Joan, I am well aware of the state of the property. It will consume nearly all the income for ten years to do justice to the place. I have gone over it carefully with Shand. I am determined to reserve to myself for the maintenance of Pendabury House only one-third of the rental, and two-thirds shall go in repairs and reconstructions, in drainage and planting and enclosing, till the entire property is in thorough order. I have settled everything with Shand and the agent. Now this will not take up all my time. I have a scheme in my head. On all sides I am informed that you are common property. Fennings' bank and Fennings' Row — pretty nearly everyone I come across, all call you Our Joan. You are democrats here, all of you, and I cannot act other than constitutionally, and in accordance with the popular will. Consequently, I shall have to lay my motion in order before your friends. Here we are at No. 16."

So he and Joan entered the corner house. Nearly all the girls were there.

It had got wind that a gentleman—or, as they called him, a chap—had been there with purpose to carry off Joan, and all the girls who had the *entrée* flocked to it. In addition, Mr. Myatt had been called in, whose capacity for butting at a door might render his assistance valuable, if it were necessary to eject Hector Beaudessart by violence. Mr. Skrimager had also been summoned, whilst passing down the street. There were present Caroline Grosser, Essie Gott, Lena Battersby, whose apprentice Joan was, and who had been summoned in the emergency, Bessie Callear, Margaret Pointon, and the rest.

As Joan entered along with Hector, she saw that all were in a condition of the liveliest excitement, and she caught Polly saying aside, indicating Hector—

"That's him."

"I like his cheek!" muttered Bessie.

"P'r'aps you'd like to kiss it," hinted Tom, nudging the girl.

"Girls," said Hector, "I find that Joan Frobisher is an obstinate girl. This is no new discovery, I have known it for some time; but I find that her will is just about as hard as nails, and nothing I can say will bend it. I want you to give consent to a proposal I have to make, and if it meets with your approbation, I will ask you to come to my assistance and make her flexible. So I solicit your favour."

"And mine too, I suppose?" threw in Tom.

"Certainly yours. You have a claim on her," said Hector.

"And I should like a word as well," observed Mr. Myatt. "For when I gets upon my political economy vein, I'm inclined to be rampageous, and having her next door keeps me off it."

"Assuredly!" said Hector.

"And I," pleaded Mrs. Mardentle, "for if she's took away I shall go into the canal. There's no other place for me."

"By all means," said Hector. "And now, ladies and gentlemen all, I must tell you that it is my fondest, most fervent desire, to convert *your* Joan into my Joan."

Murmurs of disapproval, and threatening demonstration from Bessie Callear.

Polly Myatt nudged her father, to rouse him to a sense of the duty that might be imposed upon him, and he nodded his bald head knowingly.

"But," added Hector, "she will not hear of it. She says she loves you all too dearly to bear to be torn away. She belongs too intimately to you."

"She do."

"And she has refused me, not once only, but once and again. She will not leave you."

"She's a thunderin' brick," said Caroline.

"I always said she was a good un'. I said it the fust time as I clapped eye on her," said Polly.

"I said it before you ever see'd her—when she ate 'arf my stick-jaw," said the boy.

"Now do not think," proceeded Hector, "that I harbour any design of taking Joan wholly away from you. I should be doing you and her a wrong if I did it — but I cannot. She would not hear of such a proceeding. As I said, I have a proposal to make that can only be carried into effect with your consent."

"Name it!" said Mr. Skrimager.

"I have," continued Hector, "a comfortable house in the country, and I want Joan to keep it for me."

Mr. Myatt now began to polish his head and prepare for action, nudged thereto by Polly.

"But there is nothing to be done there," Hector went on, "and neither she nor I can be idle. So what I say is: Will you let me have her away for half the year, that is to say the summer months, and for the other half, the winter months, she and I will be here with you. I am going into the bank, and shall work there and not be an idle loafer. What say you to that?"

The girls looked at one another, and Mr. Myatt bowed his ear to hear what Polly had to say on the matter, as well as to intimate his readiness to butt at Hector and project him into the street if this proposal did not commend itself to his daughter's views. Polly spoke out—

"As chaps go," she said, "take him all in all, he ain't so much amiss. I've seen wusser."

"And I suppose," observed Caroline, "she's sure to marry some day. We all does, or hopes to."

"It's a law of natur'," said Mr. Myatt; "you can't go agin' natur'."

"He speaks fair," said Bessie. "But how are we to know he'll keep to his word? If we could be sure of that, I would say let her have him."

"And I," interjected Tom. "I will consent if I may act as father, and give her away."

"And I," said Joan, "only on condition that Hector binds himself, as I bind myself to you all, dearest friends, that this arrangement shall be conscientiously observed, not for one year, but for five."

"My hand to it," said Hector.

"When the five years are ended, the whole arrangement shall be gone into together, and fresh order taken if need be," said Joan.

"On that condition we give you our Joan," said the girls.

"Ditto," added Tom.

CHAPTER XXXI

"COME OVER AND HELP US!"

THE girls quickly departed. They were aware that for this one evening they would have to keep away. As Polly said, nudging Bessie Callear, "Put yourself in her place. We must leave her with her young man."

Then said Hector to little Tom—

"Mannikin! let me carry you upstairs."

He gathered the boy in his blankets in his arms.

"And here is your bundle," said Joan. "New garments for you to dress yourself out in to-morrow morning, and select the suit that is most becoming."

"I may have a squint at 'em to-night?" asked the lad.

"Certainly, and dream of them all the night."

"Look 'ere," said the urchin, "print across my back and weskit and down the breeches, 'Tom Treddlehoyle, Esquire,' wi' markin' ink, or blowed if the guv'ner won't put 'em up the spout and drink what he gets by 'em."

When Tom had been consigned to his bed, and Cissie had been instructed to administer to him a bowl of hot bread and milk, then Joan and Hector were alone in the little parlour.

They seated themselves at the table.

"Joan," said the young man, "what are your intentions with regard to this urchin Tom, now that he is on the mend, is clean, and about to be re-clothed?"

"I do not know what to do. His father has not been near the place to inquire after or see him since he has been ill. I dare not send him back to the horrible den whence I plucked him. The doing so would spoil all the good effected. He will need care for some time and plenty of good food to nourish him, neither of which would he get there. Oh, the horrors of the place where his father lives! No child can grow up in it and become other than a moral cripple. It is a corner heaped up with social wreckage."

"I am able to assist you," said Hector. "I have a caretaker with his wife at Rosewood. He is a worthy man, who attends to the garden, and she is a motherly body, who keeps the house ventilated and dry. I will send the little imp to them; there he will enjoy pure air, receive good nourishment, and be given healthy occupation. In time we shall be able to judge where to put him and on what to employ him permanently."

"Thank you, Hector. You have lifted a burden from my mind. I was at a loss what to do with the boy, how to open to the little waif some future. Already, although you have not been here for long, you have supplied the means of saving a little life and soul from destruction."

"That is settled, then," said Hector. "Now let us clear away ambiguities, and arrange the terms of our convention. When are we to be married?"

"Not till next Easter twelvemonth. I want you to become thoroughly acquainted with this potter people. I want you to become interested in them. Then we shall be united in a common purpose of life."

"Very well—and if, looking so far ahead, I may ask it, where are we to be married?"

"Of course, it can be nowhere but here."

"And do you mean, Joan, that till we are old and grey-headed we are to spend every year half here and half at Pendabury?"

"No, Hector, I am not so inconsiderate and extravagant as that. I bound you to five years only. In that period you and I will have had time to become intimate with the needs, prejudices, deficiencies, as well as with the sterling good qualities of the operative class, so as to be able to take such practical steps as lie within our scope to remedy the former, and I trust we shall be able to interest and engage others in the same work. What is wanted is to set the ball rolling, not to kick it into the goal."

"But assuredly, what with primary and technical schools, the new generation will become cultivated and more intelligent than the old."

"That may be. The schools will sharpen the brain and give edge to the wit, but will never supply that which underlies all greatness, and that is—principle. That they make no attempt to inculcate, nor again that which grows out of and becomes a necessary adjunct to principle—self-control. What would you think of whetting knives and putting them in the hands of lunatics? Let knives be made keen by all means, but make sure that those to whom they are given have sound heads. Our schools are engaged in creating intellectual monsters, as did Frankenstein—very clever, very cunning, entirely selfish, and absolutely unscrupulous. To other quarters the mass of our population must look to acquire principle and the power of self-government. Religion might be assumed to furnish this need, but the popular religion is mere emotionalism, stimulated by sensationalism, and is a feeling and not a rule of life. I look to the upper classes, in whom self-rule has become a habit, through centuries of training, to bring this quality among the masses by their example. Let members of the classes enter into and be among the masses, and infuse into them this element of greatness. You do not leaven a lump by putting the yeast on the surface, but by working it into the body. That is why I do not consider that a great work will be wrought by parson and Sisters and all the ecclesiastical organisations employed for a good purpose. But I do think that a truly glorious result will be attained by the social fusion that I advocate, for by that means you bring the very highest acquisition of Christian civilisation into the very heart of the vast mass of our population, to permeate it in every part. But to come back to ourselves. I do not desire you to be bound down for more than five years to the bench of an artisan. By that time you will have become so thoroughly acquainted with the English working man, that you can leave your stool to another and a younger, and—who can say?—aim at a seat in the House of Commons, where you can enforce by word and vote what you have learned by experience to be imperative. Is it not strange, Hector, that our young people are put through a course of mathematics, classics, natural science, foreign languages, and then are sent out into the world without any knowledge of mankind, which is the supreme study of all? We encourage them to take up the pursuit of botany, or chemistry, or geology; we bid them collect fossils, mosses, moths—go down even to postage-stamps; we are glad to find them engaged in observing the habits of the earthworm, and studying the life evolution of the daddylonglegs, but never think of urging them to descend among our people and probe the deep mysteries of their existence. I would have every young fellow, before he takes up a career or profession, as soldier, priest, or politician, pass a twelvemonth at least in a dockyard, a factory, or a mine, as an ordinary working hand. Then he would be qualified for life in a way incalculably better than if he can write Greek verses and do quadratic equations. Do not for a moment suppose that the scheme I suggest will be all and only for the benefit of the masses. It will be of the mightiest avail to the members of the classes also, who have the hardihood to follow my proposal."

"That is all very well in theory, Joan, but would not this result in some deterioration—the acquisition of bad habits and low tastes?"

"There always will be certain men who, like Falstaff, have a certain alacrity in sinking, men who are morally limp, and cannot stand unless supported, —but such will be of no use anywhere, and such are precisely the men who will stand shivering on the brink and never muster courage for the plunge. To one who breaks down there will be twenty who will be braced up."

"It seems to me to be very risky for girls of good breeding and education to step into such association as is inevitable in a factory or a potbank."

"Of course there is risk. All could not stand it.

That has been the case with Sibyll. But some can, and will gain immeasurably by so doing, and will give as well as gain. But I dispute the suggestion made, that they will be treated with anything but respect. An Englishman, to whatever class he belongs, respects a woman, if she respects herself. I have not met with any insolence, only with courtesy and kindliness. No girl need fear association with the English artisan, if she hold herself erect. However, it is rather to you young men that I look with great hopes. The universities have their missions among costermongers and dockers—to which they send down their enthusiastic best blood—but these are religious and ecclesiastical. I want social missionaries, such as may become leaders with an immense army behind them. I have no faith whatever in your Radical and Socialistic demagogues, but I have immense confidence in the cream and flower of our young men of culture, if they will buckle to their work, and get into touch with the people. It seems to me, Hector, that a new and grinding tyranny has to be fought; it is no longer royal despotism, nor feudalism, but it is the pressure of modern civilisation. That which the public demands is cheap fabrics and cheap ware of every kind; and cheap fabrication means the oppression of the worker. I presume that one of the most deadly of all pursuits is that of the rubber collector in the swamps of South America. No man engaged in that lives six years, and his life as a collector is one of solitude, famine, and torture from mosquitoes. Who drive them into those malarial marshes? Who use up lives at such a rate? The general public, that will have its india-rubber cycle tyres. At home, what is perhaps the most dreadful and destructive to life of all trades is the making of bleaching-powder; yet the wife and daughter of the man who sacrifices his life in the manufacture would scorn to use calico that had not been dressed with this destructive powder. What disease is more horrible than that produced by the manufacture of lucifer matches? yet the mother of the girl whose jaw is corroded will squander a box of matches with total disregard. The public is the Juggernaut of to-day, under whose wheels thousands of lives are ground into the earth, or, if the lives are spared, all beauty and joy of life are crushed out of them. Now what the workers need are men who can see both sides of every question, who can stand high enough to command the entire horizon, and who can use their cultivated energies and their skilled abilities to defend the workers against the tyranny of modern civilisation, and to force home on the mind of the general public the necessity for considering the artisan who ministers to its well-being. The public is tender-hearted and is easily roused, but it is nevertheless selfish and exacting, and it is easily lulled back into indifference. We want the men to search and find out what are the hardships, and then to seek the remedies, which will not be worse than the ills they cure. Then we want them to insist on reforms that are sound and justifiable, insist in season and out of season, and insist that the artisan shall not be brutalised by the trade he practises to satisfy the hunger of the general public for the cheap and nasty."

"You are on fire, Joan."

"You will be when you have been for a few months in the same situation as myself, and surrounded by the same society. I have come so to identify myself with the people, so to love them, that I am ready to sacrifice *you* unless you are fired with the same enthusiasm as myself."

"Joan, I have no thought but of endeavouring, in my poor way and to the best with my poor abilities, to do what I can in the cause."

"God bless you for saying that!" exclaimed she, her eyes filling as she stretched out her hand across the table to him.

"And now, Joan," said he, taking her hand and pressing his lips to it, "one thing more: I don't like the looks of your girl Cissie."

"No—she is poisoned with the lead."

"Nor of that other, who, for all that she is bleached and crippled, has a mind full of force."

"What—Polly, my pal?"

"Yes, she does not look healthy."

"She also has been poisoned."

"And that pallid woman with the short breath and hacking cough?"

"She has the potters' rot."

"It seems to me that they need fresh air, abundance of milk, and complete change of surroundings."

"There is no doubt about that—and these are but a few out of many."

"Then, Joan, why not send them to Rosewood Cottage?"

"Do you mean it?"

"I do. It is entirely at your service as a sanitarium. The only difficulty I can see is—who will look after them and see that they are properly attended to, according to their several needs?"

"Julie."

"Will she come?"

"I am certain that she will. Oh, Hector, you have touched only the fringe of all this misery, and already you have opened the way to effecting incalculable good. Pass me my writing-book — I will write at once to Julie. I have her promise."

Then she took pen and paper, and wrote—

"Come over and help us!"

CHAPTER XXXII

TWO AIMS

"MY DEAR JOAN,—You are intolerable. Who would ever have supposed that you were so sly as to send me out of the way to Pendabury—though, Heaven knows, I am delighted to be anywhere, so long as I am not in the Potteries—and to entice Hector Beaudessart away from his own mansion and compel him to take up his residence in the same horrible place that you are in? You good people are awfully deep. Of course you had your ends clearly in view, and the whole scheme was well laid and adroitly carried out. He has been here hardly at all since I came to Pendabury, and when he is here he can talk of nothing but pots and potters—the making of one and the improvement of the other. I must say you people who set up to be philanthropic, and all the rest of it, are as cunning as foxes, and poor simple creatures, like myself, are no match for you.

"Well, as soon as I saw how this fine comedy was going to end, I had to provide for myself. I have no idea of playing second fiddle any more under you. I don't care, although I have good cause to be angry. With a little *finessing* I brought Colonel Wood to his knees, and have accepted him. He is old enough to be my father, and is rather deaf and a bit of a sawney. But I don't mind. He is comfortably off, has a nice place, no bothering children by his first wife—I shall bundle her portrait into the attics. I intend to give dinner-parties and dances; I shall hunt, and have shooting, and lawn tennis, and hockey parties, and enjoy myself to the nines.

"I look back on that—excuse a vulgarism, as old Shand would say, but really, a vulgar expletive will alone describe the place—that beastly Black Hole, as I do upon a hideous nightmare. So I bargain, if you do come to Pendabury; and we meet, not to breathe one word of shop.

"There, I have good cause to be angry with you, but I am too disgusted at your bad taste in sticking where you are to be angry at anything you may do. So, fare thee well.—Your loving sister,

"SIBYLLA."

"Polly," said Joan, looking up, "there is going to be a marriage in our family."

"I have been long expecting it," said the girl.

"My sister."

"Oh!—she!"

A twelvemonth had passed since the arrangement had been reached described in the last chapter.

Polly had been sent into the country, and had returned looking fresh and sound, only her hand was not recovered. Electricity had, however, done something towards the improvement of its condition.

Cissie also was back, an altered being, with the pure red blood mantling her cheeks, still the devoted hench-woman of Joan, to whom she clung as a leech.

"My bones!" exclaimed Polly, "you've no idea how took up my father is with his bulbs and window-gardening. He says it has only one drawback—there ain't no slugs in the boxes to entice out and kill. And the way in which you keep him supplied with flowers—as one goes off, another to come on. He is so took up with his plants he's forgot about his politics at the Blue Boar. But then it is the same all along the Row. There ain't nowhere in the town such a show as we make with flowers in our windows—and sent from Pendabury every fortnight! Lord! I don't know what our folk would do now without their flowers! And it has had a coorious effect on some of them. I mind when none of us cared a doit to go into the country for a holiday, if there weren't shows, or dancing, or something of town carried out into the country. We thought there was nothing to see there, nothing to amuse us. But now some of our young folk are all agog to get among the green lanes, or out on the moors, searching after wild flowers. It has set up a new interest in their minds. That's what you have done."

Hector had stuck to his work in the potbank, and had become intensely interested in it, as also, and mainly, in the men with whom he was brought in contact. He did not remain at his work there altogether. He returned every now and then to Pendabury, to attend to duties that required his presence on the estate. Joan, however, did not abandon her post, and she despatched such girls and others to Rosewood as, by failure of power and an anæmic look, showed symptoms of being attacked by the lead.

"And pray, when are you going to be married?" asked Polly.

"Not till next Easter," answered Joan. "That was our compact at the outset."

"And after that, what shall you do?"

"I shall hold to my plan, and spend the winter months here, that is to say from Michaelmas to Lady Day, in the same way as heretofore. You can do without me in the summer."

"We shall have to. Where will you be married?"

"Here, of course."

"Here! Then who will be bridesmaids?"

"Can you question? You and Cissie, and Caroline and Bessie and the rest."

"That will be fine. Bless my bones! But when you go we shall miss you."

"And do you not suppose that I shall miss you?"

"Ah, well," said Polly, with a sigh, "it will be but for a while, six months, and then we shall have our Joan back again."

"Yes, your Joan. In heart, in soul, in life I belong to you."

"We can't do without you. You are, and ever will be, OUR JOAN."

THE END

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